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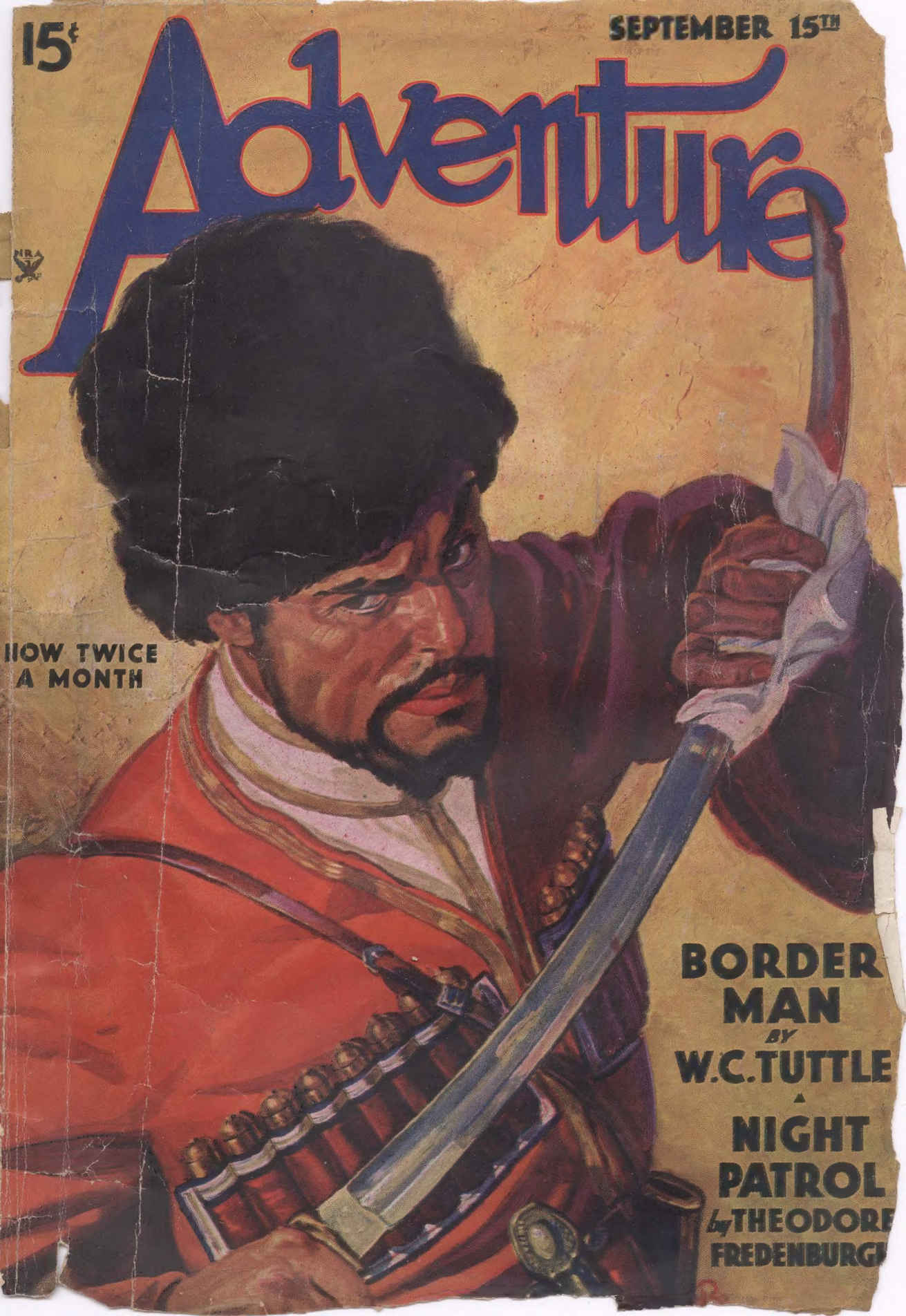

BORDER MAN
BY
W.C. TUTTLE

NIGHT PATROL
by THEODORE FREDENBURGH

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September 15, 1934
Volume 89, No. 4

Twice A Month

A Complete Novel

Border Man . . . . . W. C. TUTTLE 2

Steve Kane was talking to his jailer in the adobe jug when the jail rose off the ground in a flying wreckage of timbers, steel and smoke—and Steve knew that big dumb Omaha Oglesby had just figured how to get him out. So they ride right out of there into this jesting and shooting novel of the West.

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Howard V. L. Bloomfield, Editor

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BORDER MAN

"I wouldn't trust that jasper, even at a game of jumpin' bean," said Omaha Oglesby. "He's cheatin' you. He's gave you an old crow-bait of a bean, and he's got a buckin' bean right off the open range for himself. Fact is, I wouldn't trust neither of you, the way you tied me up."

CHAPTER I

SIX STICKS OF DYNAMITE

STEVE KANE, bewhiskered and dirty, leaned against the huge, rusty old iron bars of his cell in the Agua Frio carcel, looking moodily down the flagged corridor toward the door of the police office. Steve was only twenty-two years of age, but nearly three months of shaveless and bathless days had made him look like an inmate of a neglected zoo.

Steve had made the mistake of crossing the Mexican Border to bring back some stolen horses. He had found the horses, which no one had denied stealing; but a misguided *cuatrero*, otherwise horsethief, had made the mistake of attempting to shoot out the issue with Steve. For this bit of accurate shooting Steve was in jail. He had never had a hearing, never been tried for the crime. The rurales had turned him over to the estimable Juan Aguilar, chief of police of Agua Frio, who threw him into a cell, and apparently forgot that such a person existed.

As Steve leaned against the bars, Pancho Trujillo, jailer and general roustabout, came down the corridor. Pancho was short, fat, pompous, proud of his ability to grow a huge mustache and to talk English. It was Pancho's duty to feed the prisoner once a day.

"Halo, Wheesker," he grinned at Steve. "'Ow you filling?"

By W. C. TUTTLE

A COMPLETE NOVEL

Steve looked closely at Pancho, who winked expressively. Steve's heart bounded. Pancho looked back at the closed door at the end of the corridor, stepped to the bars and said softly:

"One man ees come to Agua Frio theese morning, and to theese man I'm deleever your message."

"You did, eh?" said Steve tensely. "Who was that man, Pancho?"

Pancho scratched his head thoughtfully, tugged at both ends of his mustache, and finally said:

"Een *Estados Unidos* ees a countree wheech ees call Neebrawska. Een Neebrawska ees a *ciudad* wheech ees—"

"Omaha?" asked Steve.

"*Si, si!* Omaha!"

"You gave my message to Omaha Oglesby?"

"*Si, si!* Beeg *vaquero,* weeth *pelirrojo.*"

"Red-headed—yeah," breathed Steve. "I'm a son-of-a-gun!"

"Sure," agreed Pancho. "But you weel not forget, Esteban, *mi amigo?*"

"I won't forget, Pancho," said Steve. "If I can get out of here, I'll pistol whip Juan Aguilar, force him to open his safe to get what is mine—and you can have the rest."

"*Gracias,* Esteban; eet ees an agriment bitween *caballeros,* eh?"

"Three months in this cursed hole, and I'd agree to give a man half of my insides, if he could get me out," sighed Steve. "But Omaha Oglesby! Good Lord! If a dumber cowpuncher ever was born, I hope I never meet him. He'll never get me out of here. Pancho."

"Si, amigo."

"You better dust out another cell. I've got a hunch you'll have two of us to feed—and one will have red hair."

"Quien sabe?" said Pancho. "Theese rad-had ees *mucho malo hombre.*"

"Yeah, he's a plenty bad actor," sighed Steve. "But he ain't got no brains. And don't I know it! Me and him work together for Barney Macrae. Why, I've spent two whole years, tryin' to keep him out of jail."

"You theenk he won't 'elp you, Esteban?" queried Pancho.

Steve spat dismally and made a wry face.

"I hope he will, Pancho. At least he knows I'm here. That's somethin'. Nobody across the line knows where I am. At least, they didn't know, until you gave my message to Omaha. Didn't he give you any idea when he might do somethin'?"

"No. Hees say for me to telling you—'ang onto your 'at. I say to heem, 'Esteban, hees got no 'at,' and hees laugh like hell."

"Funny, eh?" sighed Steve.

"Hees no laugh like fonny; hees show hees teet'—like wolf laugh."

"He can't help that, Pancho! he's got buck-teeth. Omaha Oglesby, I hope you enlist some brains, before you try to take me."

Pancho glanced at the corridor door, tugged at his mustache, and looked at Steve.

"I'm 'ear Aguilar say that *mañana* you have sentence for shoot a *Mejicano.* You weesh to mak' guess w'at they do for you?"

"Did that horse-thief die?" asked Steve.

"He die t'ree, four day ago."

Steve turned away from the bars. If Omaha Oglesby didn't do something very soon, it would be too late.

"You don't theenk theese Omaha do notheeng?" asked Pancho. Steve came back to the bars.

"Did you tell him I was to be sentenced tomorrow, Pancho?"

"Si, amigo. I tell heem that *mañana* be too damn late."

"Good! There's a chance!"

And, as if in punctuation to Steve's exclamation, that old adobe jail seemed to rise off the ground. It vomited smoke, twisted timbers, ripped steel, while the earth shook like an earthquake. Steve Kane felt himself flung outward, buffeted from side to side, overwhelmed with debris.

Then he was out in the glow of the sunset, staggering, falling, trying to see through dust-filled eyes. He could hear men yelling. Near him a gun whanged wickedly, and a voice grunted:

"You better duck, you iggerent cholo!"

"Omaha!" gasped Steve. "Omaha!"

"My Gawd, is that you, Steve? I thought I blowed Sandy Claws out of that old jail. C'mon!"

He grabbed the blinded Steve by the arm, and they ran clumsily. Twice Omaha stopped to shoot, and the effects seemed to amuse him. They ran until Steve's lungs were wheezing painfully. His eyesight was gradually returning, but he felt as though every joint in his body was about to fall apart.

"Here's the horse!" panted Omaha. "Git into the saddle! Whoa, Simon Legree."

"Only one horse?" wheezed Steve.

"Hell, I forgot to bring two!" gasped Omaha.

Steve managed to get into the saddle, while Omaha mounted behind him and spurred the plunging broncho into a run. After a hundred yards, Omaha reached past Steve and took the reins.

"You'd be goin' back into Mexico," he told Steve. "We're goin' out—not in."

"They were goin' to shoot me against a blank wall tomorrow," said Steve.

"Yeah, I know. But they're out of luck."

Thirty minutes later they had crossed the border at a spot where Omaha had cut the wire fence, and stopped to take stock of themselves.

"Yo're a awful mess, Steve," declared Omaha.

"What happened to yore nose?" asked Steve.

"Cut that damn fuse too short. Blooey! Damn jail blowed up in my face. Sa-a-ay! I have got a nose, ain't I!"

"Yeah," admitted Steve, "you have. In fact, you could go around dividin' yore nose with lots of stub-nosed people, and still have plenty left to smell through, Omaha. Why didn't you cut a long fuse?"

"Well, I only had a few inches of the damn stuff—and I thought I might have to shoot more'n once; so I divided it up. Steve, I didn't know that six sticks of dynamite could act so damn energetic."

"Was there any of the jail left? I couldn't see, you know."

"Nothin' substantial," replied Omaha, and then broke into laughter. "Yo're the funniest lookin' critter I ever seen, Steve. If you had a moth-eaten gun, you'd look like Rip Van Whatchacallim."

"How'd you look, after three months in that damn jail? No shaves, no haircuts, no bath."

"You shore haired out a-plenty," choked Omaha. "When I seen you out there, turnin' handsprings, I says to myself, 'All I've done is blow the end out of a hair mattress. You see, I didn't notice yore legs and arms—not at first."

Omaha Oglesby was a full head taller than Steve, who was an inch short of six feet. Omaha's hair was a bright, brick-red, and his moon-like face was covered with freckles. He had sloping shoulders, which accentuated the length of his arms, and his two hands looked like hams. He wore the biggest boots of any man in Arizona, and in his own words, "When I'm in full plumage, I weigh two hundred and forty pounds."

"Well," sighed Steve, "you shore took drastic means to get me out of that jail—but it's all right; I appreciate it."

"I dunno what drastic means," admitted Omaha, "but I shore took that jail off yore carcass. I hope Juan Aguilar is under all of it, but I know he ain't, 'cause I chased him down the street with a bullet, jist as I found you."

CHAPTER II

TRAIN ROBBERY

BARNEY MACRAE'S L4L ranch, known as the Nester ranch, had been the bone of contention in a lawsuit two years previous to this time. The property had been claimed by the Quarter-Circle JHE, as a part of their established range. But Barney Macrae, a fighting Scot, homesteaded it, fought it out in the courts, and won. He claimed an equal right to the open range, and started building up a herd, much to the displeasure of Joe East, owner of the Quarter Circle JHE, a hard-riding, hard-bitted cowman, who had dreams of owning all of Painted Valley.

It was dark, when Steve and Omaha rode in at the L4L, and dismounted at the stable. The front room of the old ranch-house was lighted, and without a word, Steve left Omaha to unsaddle the horse, and hurried up to the ranch-house. He wanted to see the look of surprise on Old Barney Macrae's face, who, no doubt had decided that Steve was dead.

He stepped up on the porch, took the two steps to the front door and flung it open. Then he recoiled quickly, and stood there, staring into the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. He blinked foolishly, shifted his eyes from the men-

acing muzzle o. the gun, and looked into the narrowed eyes of a very determined young lady.

"Well, I'll be damned!" breathed Steve.

"What do you want?" asked the girl. Her voice held a very brittle quality, and Steve saw her knuckles tighten.

"Give me liberty or give me death," replied Steve inanely. He started to kick himself on the ankle, but hesitated. Any sudden move might cause her to pull the trigger. Her arms were wavering a little; the gun was very heavy.

Steve heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Omaha trot up the steps. The big red-head's eyes opened wide, when he saw the gun.

"Oh, yeah!" he gulped. "Miss Macrae, I'd like to have you meet Steve Kane. Steve's the cowboy we lost several weeks ago. I reckon I told you about him, didn't I—or didn't I?"

Slowly the girl lowered the shotgun.

"Terrible lookin', ain't he?" said Omaha. "He comes from a awful hairy family."

Steve turned and looked at Omaha.

"Where's Barney Macrae, Omaha?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah!" grunted Omaha. "I plumb forgot to tell you. You see, I forgot that you've been in that jail all this time. Well, you see, about two, three days after you faded out, Barney Macrae was killed."

"He—what?" Steve leaned against the doorway and stared at Omaha and the girl. "Omaha," he said huskily, "you don't mean that."

"Cross my heart, I hope to die, Steve."

"Won't you come in?" asked the girl.

Steve came in and sat down on a chair. He was conscious of his deplorable appearance, realized that he must look terrible to this girl, but he wanted to know about Barney Macrae.

"Miss Macrae is Barney's daughter Mary, Steve," said Omaha. Steve nodded. He had heard Barney say something about having been married and having a family.

"But tell me about Barney," urged Steve. "Me and him was mighty good friends, you know. Won't you tell me, Miss Macrae? You see, Omaha would forget half of it. Why, we rode together all the way from Agua Frio, and he never said a word about yore father bein' dead."

"You hadn't ort to kick about me," said Omaha. "I shot a jail off yore neck and saved yore life."

"You did all that, Omaha," said Steve. "I'll never git over bein' grateful to you for that—but yo're still awful dumb."

"I reckon I did cut that fuse too short," admitted Omaha.

"I'll try and tell you what happened," said Mary Macrae. "I wasn't here, when he was killed. As a matter of fact, I did not get here, until ten days after the funeral. It—"

"The damn liars!" snorted Omaha, and Steve looked at him sharply.

"They said he got that fifty thousand dollars in gold off that train robbery, and then shot himself," explained Omaha. Steve shifted in his chair and looked at the girl. Her pretty face looked grim in the yellowed lamp-light.

"I know what they say," she said.

"Yeah, and they tried to say that I was in on it," added Omaha. "Jist 'cause there was a couple fellers. Me! I ain't no robber."

"If you've blowed off plenty, suppose Miss Macrae tells me some more about it, Omaha," said Steve.

"Well, go ahead. But I'll tell you this much—I'm goin' to cuss every time I see a pinto horse. I hate 'em."

Steve reached over, picked up the shotgun and laid it across his lap, the muzzles covering Omaha.

"Go ahead, Miss Macrae," he said.

"It's shore embarassin'," sighed Omaha. "Git a busted nose from savin' a man's life, and then have him menace you with a shotgun."

Mary Macrae did not know whether to laugh or be frightened. This bearded young man, who seemed to have rolled in dust and dirt, had serious gray eyes.

"I reckon you can go ahead, Miss Macrae," he said.

"I don't know just where to begin," she said.

"Start at the train robbery," suggested Omaha. "The gold was in a special safe—two hundred pounds of gold money. They stuck up the train two miles out of Encinas City, cut off the engine and the express car, and runs 'em danged near into town. The engineer says to the express messenger—no, it was the fireman—or was it? Anyway, they blowed open the safe and dug out the sacks of money. But the messenger jumped out the door on the other side of the car, leavin' his helper. Them there holdups thought the helper was the messenger; so they didn't miss the messenger. Well—"

"I'll bet that's why they connected you with the holdup," interrupted Steve ironically.

"Well, anyway," continued Omaha, "the messenger jumped into that cut and busted his leg, and by the time he crawled back up to the track, he wasn't in very good shape to do good shootin' with his six-gun; but he cuts loose.

"Them two fellers had done loaded the gold onto that pinto horse, and one of them bullets creases Mr. Pinto across the rump. It must have kinda burned the pinto, which busts loose and goes hellin' out of there, with all that gold, while them two robbers is duckin' and dodgin' tryin' to heeze lead into that messenger.

"The engineer, fireman and helper are all tied up, but in the excitement the engineer gits loose, finds the messenger's shotgun, and joins in the chorus. That was the end of the battle. Both men got away. The engine crew takes the news to Encinas City, and the manhunt starts. Every one of them fellers is able to describe that pinto, as bein' white, with black polky-dots and a pure black head."

"Why that's Calico—Barney's horse!" exclaimed Steve.

"Yeap," agreed Omaha. "He had the bullet scrape on his rump, when they found him."

"But what about Barney Macrae?" asked Steve.

"It was the next afternoon," said Omaha sadly. "I was at Encinas City to a dance, the night of the holdup, and didn't know anythin' about it. Al Hickey, the sheriff, along with Joe East and Tuck Doble, rode in to ask Barney Macrae some questions. They said he ran into the house, when he seen 'em comin'. They was scared he went to git a rifle; so they hopped off their horses, scattered out and kinda surrounded the place. Then they hears a shot fired in the house. It wasn't fired at any of them; so after while they sneaked up and found him. He'd shot himself."

For a long time Steve sat there, hunched in the chair, his chin in his hands.

"He had ten of them twenty-dollar gold pieces in his pockets," added Omaha.

"Could they identify the money?" asked Steve.

" 'Course they couldn't. But they all identified Calico."

Steve sighed and straightened up in his chair.

"I reckon I better clean up a little, Omaha," he said.

"He's been in a Mexican jail three months," explained Omaha. "I blew him out today."

"What on earth happened to your nose?" asked Mary.

"Cut the fuse too short," grinned Omaha. "The jail blowed right up in my face."

"I hope it didn't kill Pancho," mused Steve. "I made a deal with him. If he'd

deliver the note to somebody who could get me out, I was to smash the office safe, take out my own belongings and let Pancho have the rest."

"He was takin' a long chance," said Omaha. "But you ain't goin' back to smash that safe, are you, Steve?"

"No, I guess not. I hate to break my word to Pancho, but I don't believe he'll be expectin' me. Miss Macrae, if you'll excuse me, I'll move out to the bunk house."

"I'm sorry I—I tried to shoot you," she said. "But I didn't know who you were—and you look queer, you know."

"That's all right," assured Omaha. "I took the shells out of the gun, before I left here this mornin'."

CHAPTER III

FIGHT TALK

THE young cowboy who stepped out of the L4L bunkhouse next morning did not in any way resemble the Steve Kane who had ridden in from the ruined Agua Frio jail. His smooth-shaved face was lean and pale from his enforced stay in the dark jail; but the Arizona sun would soon change that. Steve had a wide, thin-lipped mouth, good teeth, and a square chin. The dirty, ragged clothes had been replaced with clean ones, nearly new boots and a nearly new Stetson sombrero, which had cost him two months' salary. Around his waist was a hand-made belt, with silver buckle and silver studs, and a big, black-handled Colt .45 hung in a well-worn holster.

Mrs. Fernandez, the Mexican cook, who had been with the ranch for a long time, gasped at sight of Steve. She had, like the rest, believed him dead. Mary Macrae looked at him, without recognition, until he smiled.

He and Mary sat down on the front porch, while Mrs. Fernandez finished cooking breakfast.

"I wish you'd tell me things," said Steve. "I've asked Omaha—but you know him. He's the best friend I've got, Miss Macrae. His heart is as big as a barrel, but Omaha don't even *try* to think."

"There isn't much to tell," replied Mary. "My mother and father separated several years ago. Eight years, to be exact. My mother and I lived in Seattle. She died three months ago."

"I'm sorry about that," said Steve. "Mine went away when I was ten. Dad was a gambler. He's been gone a long time, too. Whisky and race horses. But how didja come to down here?"

"Mother used to hear from Dad once in a while. He would send her money. I didn't intend living down here with him—I guess I just wanted to see him again."

"He was a fine feller," said Steve. "He had it tough, here, fightin' the Quarter-Circle JHE outfit. But he was a fighter. I trailed some of his horses down into Mexico, and they threw me into jail for throwin' lead through the thief that took 'em."

Omaha came over from the bunkhouse, grinning widely, and flopped on the bottom step.

"Steve," he said, "didja know the horse-thief that you leaded up down there?"

"Manuel Rojas."

"Rojas, eh?"

"Yeah; a friend of Joe East."

"So they was goin' to execute you for killin' Manuel Rojas, eh?"

"That's what Pancho told me, Omaha."

"It's funny," smiled Omaha. "Mexicans shore are funny."

"What's funny about it?"

"What's funny about it? Well, I seen Manuel Rojas in Cinco Robles a couple of days ago, and he shore didn't look like a dyin' man to me."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I know Manuel Rojas, don't I?"

"Yeah, I guess you do."

"Hell, I even talked with him, Steve. He ain't dead, unless somebody killed him since day before yesterday."

"Mrs. Fernandez is calling us for breakfast," said Mary.

She ate with the two cowboys, occupying her father's place at the table.

"Did you miss me, Mrs. Fernandez?" asked Steve.

"I theenk for sure you are dead," she said. "So I weep. You are gone so long. You goin' stay here now?"

"I don't reckon Miss Macrae's got work enough to hire me; so I'll drift along pretty soon."

"I don't really know what there is to be done," said Mary.

"I've been doin' it all," stated Omaha. "I've been foreman, *segundo* and cowpuncher, all in one."

"I see," grinned Steve. "The foreman told the *segundo* to tell you to do somethin'; so you sneaked away and slept in the shade."

"Theese Omaha ees good shade 'unter," agreed Mrs. Fernandez.

"There you go—hoppin' onto me," wailed Omaha. "I shore wasn't huntin' no shade, when I blowed that jail off yore neck, pardner."

"You blew it from the shady side."

"Gosh, I guess I did, at that."

"Mr. Joe East wants to buy the ranch," said Mary.

Steve sat up straight, and looked at her curiously.

"Joe East does, eh? Well, well! Has he made you an offer, Mary?"

"Oh-oh!" snorted Omaha. "*Mary*, eh?"

Mary colored quickly.

"That is my name," she said. "Mr. East hasn't made me an offer yet. A lawyer named Johnson talked with me about selling the ranch to Mr. East, and said he would get an offer."

"Carl Johnson," nodded Steve.

"He does the lawin' for the Quarter-Circle JHE," added Omaha.

"I feel that I really must sell," said Mary. "I don't know a thing about ranching. Why, I don't know a cow from a calf."

"It's all a matter of sizes," said Omaha.

Steve shoved back from the table and began rolling a cigaret.

"I'm shore sorry," he said. "I'd hate to see Joe East get this ranch. Him and Barney Macrae fought each other awful hard. When yore father hired me, Joe East put up an awful yelp about the L4L hirin' a gunman to do their fightin'."

"Joe has always been scared of you, Steve," said Omaha.

"Joe East is yellow. That don't go for all his men; they're plenty forked."

"Did you boys fight to help dad keep this ranch?" asked Mary.

"Mostly arguments," said Steve quickly.

"But you went into Mexico to try and save some stolen horses."

"Well," smiled Steve, "I kinda overestimated my ability that time. But that ain't got a thing to do with this deal between you and Joe East. Don't grab their offer, even if it does look good—'cause it won't be a fair one. Joe East wants this ranch; so make him pay for it."

Mary looked at Steve for several moments.

"Is there somethin' on yore mind, Mary?" he asked.

"I was just thinking of something," she replied. "No doubt Mr. Johnson will handle the negotiations for Mr. East; and I was wondering if you would handle it for me, Steve."

"Lay my head beneath a rose!" snorted Omaha. "Go ahead, Steve!"

Steve laughed shortly, got to his feet and walked over to a window, where he hunched his shoulders and looked outside.

"Well, go ahead and tell her what you'll do, Steve," urged Omaha.

Steve started to turn back to them, but jerked back and looked outside.

"Speak of the devil!" he muttered. "Here comes Joe East and his man Friday."

Mary got to her feet. "What shall I tell them?"

"Tell 'em to sit down," replied Steve. "I'll be in there pretty soon."

Mary went to the front door and invited the two men into the main room. Joe East was a big, raw-boned man, gaunt-faced, with deep-set eyes, almost hidden under heavy brows. Johnson was short and fat, with a moon-like face and stringy, blonde hair. He invariably wore a stiff-bosom dress shirt, sans collar, barrel-shape cuffs, with huge buttons; and just now he wore a stiff, straw hat, at least one size too small.

Johnson cleared his throat and beamed upon Mary.

"I have talked this matter over with Mr. East," he told her. "At first, he was not interested in any proposition, but I explained how the situation was with you, and your desire to dispose of this small ranch; so we came out here to close a deal at once. Of course, Miss Macrae, you understand the comparatively small value of your holdings. These buildings do not represent much."

"I reckon Miss Macrae understands all that," interrupted East heavily. "I'd prob'ly tear 'em down, anyway."

"Exactly," agreed Johnson. "Now we come to the livestock. Have you any idea how many head of cattle you own, Miss Macrae?"

"I haven't any idea."

"It don't matter," said East. "I'll throw my outfit in here and make a count. I'll grade 'em, and pay her market price, less the expense of makin' the count, and all that."

"Yo're sure goin' to be a big help to Miss Macrae, ain't you, East?" drawled a voice from the kitchen, and the two men jerked around to see Steve Kane, lounging against the doorway.

Joe East started to get to his feet, but sank back.

"Where'd you come from, Kane?" he asked.

"It don't make any difference, does it?" asked Steve. "I'm here."

"We thought you'd left the country," said Johnson.

Mary got to her feet and turned to Joe East.

"I believe I shall let Mr. Kane handle this deal for me," she said. "You see, he knows more about the value of things than I do."

Joe East snorted. Johnson shuffled the papers in his hands.

"Well, I—I don't know about this," he said. "Our deal was with Miss Mcrae, you see, Kane. As a matter of fact, I—I—"

"What are you offerin' for the L4L, exclusive of the stock?" asked Steve. "Talk money, if you want to do business."

Joe East got ponderously to his feet and picked up his hat.

"You've got that offer in writin', ain't you?" asked Steve, indicating the papers in Johnson's hands.

"Never mind that," said East quickly. "I'm not dealin' with you, Kane."

Steve laughed. "Ranch ain't worth anythin'. Roundup and grade her stock and pay her market price, less the cost of handlin' the stuff."

"The deal is off," declared East, red with anger.

"The steal is off, you mean."

Joe East's huge shoulders hunched as he glared at the young cowboy.

"You'll pay for that remark, Kane."

"Play yore hand, East," said Steve, his voice lazy, indifferent.

The two men rode away.

"Let's fight 'em," suggested Omaha.

Steve was thoughtful.

"Mebbe we can find somebody else that would want to buy," he said. "It's easy enough to talk about fightin' the Quarter-Circle JHE. Joe East can stack

the cards against us easy. He can stop any buyer from takin' a chance. The average man don't want to buy a ranch in a place where he's got to fight all the time. East can steer any cattle buyer from dealin' with us, even if he has to sell under the market. He's got plenty fightin' men—and we're only two, Omaha."

Mary had walked to the doorway, and now she turned.

"I believe those two men are coming back."

Steve stepped over to the doorway, and turned quickly to Omaha.

"It's Al Hickey, Runt Randall and Manuel Rojas, the feller I was supposed to have killed in Mexico. You and Mary talk to 'em, and I'll move in later."

"What'll I say to 'em?" asked Omaha.

"Wish 'em a happy birthday—or anythin'. Use yore brains."

CHAPTER IV

"DRAW A KNIFE AND I'LL SOCK YOU FULL OF LEAD!"

OMAHA stepped out on the porch as the three men rode up. Al Hickey, the sheriff, was a tall, gaunt man, with a nose like the bill of a hawk and a mustache which only grew well on one side. Hickey always looked tired and acted tired, except in times of trouble, when he showed speed beyond belief.

"Runt" Randall was six feet, five inches, and tipped the scales at two hundred and twenty-five pounds. Runt's eyes were round and very blue, wide spaced above flat cheek-bones, and his nose, which had been broken several times, blobbed out at the end like, except for color, a chocolate drop.

Rojas was a skinny, little half-Mexican, half-Apache, who wore gaudy clothes, and hinted that he had taught Pancho Villa all he knew about warfare.

"Happy birthday, gents," greeted Omaha.

"Has somebody been born today?" laughed Runt.

"I s'pose so. Hyah, Al; how's crime?"

"Oh, I reckon it's all right, Omaha."

"You ain't never found that gold yet, have you, Al?"

"*Buenas dias, amigo,*" smiled Rojas.

Omaha gave him a dirty look. "Go to hell, you bug-headed Apache!"

Rojas looked hurt. It amused Runt, who winked at Omaha.

"What are you sore at Rojas for?" asked the sheriff.

"He's a lousy little horsethief, that's why."

Rojas jerked slightly, and one of his skinny hands rubbed along his greasy sash.

"Go ahead," invited Omaha. "Draw a gun or a knife, and I'll sock you plumb full of lead. I'd jist love to do it, Rojas."

"This is goin' too far," interrupted the sheriff. "Rojas! Take yore hand away from yore belt. Omaha, would you mind tellin' me about this horse stealin'?"

"Mebbe I can do a better job of the tellin'," said Steve, as he came through the doorway for the second time that morning.

Rojas jerked upright in his saddle, staring wildly. For several moments he seemed incapable of motion—then he was all motion. He whirled his horse around, slashed it with his spurs, and was racing madly away, before the two officers realized what was going on.

Omaha stepped to the porch-rail, drew his gun and fired, just as Rojas, leaning wide in the saddle, made the turn at the gate to go west on the main road. His sombrero flipped off his head and sailed gracefully away. Rojas did not stop to get it.

"You dang fool!" snorted the sheriff. "Some day you'll kill somebody, doin' things like that!"

"I wouldn't bet on it," replied Omaha dryly. "This gun seems to shoot a little high. I'll hold a little lower next

time—so's not to damage the hat."

The sheriff glared at Omaha, but turned to Steve.

"Where have you been and where did you come from?"

"Well," replied Steve, "I've been in quite a lot of places, but I came originally from Texas. There was quite a big family of us Kanes down there. We moved up into New Mexico, when I was five years old. Lots of folks think I'm a native of New Mexico—but I'm a Texan. What's the next question, sheriff?"

"That ain't what I meant," growled the sheriff. Runt chuckled softly and wiped his eyes.

"Ask me somethin' else, then. You'd be surprised at the number of answers I've got."

"No, I wouldn't," replied the sheriff. "Omaha, what did you mean, when you called Rojas a horsethief?"

"I didn't mean he was a pickpocket," replied Omaha. "You know what a horsethief is, don't you, Al?"

You don't need to get smart with me."

"Well, I meant he was a horsethief," said Omaha. "H-o-a-r-s-e t-h-e-e-f. I can tell you in Mexican, if you want me to, Al."

"Whose horses did he steal?"

"Which time do you mean?"

"Any time, dang it!"

"Do you think I've been keepin' books on him all his life? All I know is that he stole five of the L4L horses."

"When?"

"He's kinda time-crazy, ain't he, Steve?" complained Omaha. "Or is there an open season on stealin' horses? I thought it was a crime any month in the year."

"Rojas stole five of our horses almost three months ago," said Steve. "I follered him down into Mexico and located the horses at a corral in Sycamoro. I got the horses loose, and me and Rojas shot it out. He was down, when the rurales swarmed in on me. They put me in jail at Agua Frio, and I was to be executed today for the murder of Manuel Rojas—but Omaha got me out of there."

"Goodness Agnes!" exclaimed Runt. "Goin' to shoot you for the murder of a man that ain't dead?"

"That's what I was told."

"So Omaha got you out, eh?" asked the sheriff grimly. "How?"

"Dynamite," replied Omaha proudly. "I knowed I couldn't get him out of the jail; so I took the jail off him. It amounted to the same thing. Look at my nose, will you? I cut the fuse too short."

"Well, I'll be a scorpion's aunt!" grunted Runt. "Blew the jail away from him, eh? Boy, I'll bet Aguilar is dancin' jigs."

"He will, if I ever catch him on this side of the line," said Steve.

"Do you want to swear out a warrant for Rojas?" asked the sheriff.

"No," replied Steve, "I don't. But you might tell him to get over the border and stay over there, 'cause I'm not forgettin' them three months in the Agua Frio jail."

"If Al don't tell him, I will," grinned Runt. "And when I'm tellin' it, I'll give him a couple boots in the pants. I've been kinda hankerin' to do that little thing."

"You keep yore nose out of this, Runt," advised the sheriff. "Try and remember that yo're an officer of the law, will you?"

"If it happens to suit me—yes. But in this case, I might forget the dignity of the law, as you put it, Al."

"Well, we better be goin'," said the sheriff. "See you later, boys."

Steve went back in the house and found Mary talking with Mrs. Fernandez. They had both seen the galloping off of Manuel Rojas.

"Theese Manuel Rojas ees *mucho malo hombre,*" declared the cook.

"Yeah, he's a bad boy,' agreed Steve.

He was looking at a hole in the paper and plaster beside the doorway, which led to the kitchen. He went over to it.

"I don't remember of ever seein' that bullet-hole before," he said.

"I see heem the other day for firs' time," said Mrs. Fernandez.

Steve looked toward the open front door. He walked out on the porch and looked back at the bullet-hole.

"Where were you the night Barney Macrae died, Mrs. Fernandez?"

"Eet was not at night. On Saturday night the train was rob. On that night I go veesit een Cinco Robles. I stay all night weeth my frien's and go to mass ver' early."

"And Omaha was at a dance in Encinas City," mused Steve. "Nobody here, except the old man. And me in jail in Agua Frio."

"Does that prove anything?" asked Mary.

"Not a thing, Mary. Except that nothin' on earth would ever make me believe that Barney Macrae pulled off a robbery. In fact, I don't believe he ever killed himself."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Steve," said Mary. "But no one else seems to doubt he did."

"I wonder if Doc Smiley had anythin' to do with this case," said Steve.

"S u r e," replied Mrs. Fernandez. "Theese ragular coroner ees away on a treep from Encinas; so theese Smiley 'andle the hinquest."

"Good!" grunted Steve. "Smiley is a white man. I reckon I'll ride to Cinco Robles and have a talk with the old doctor."

CHAPTER V

A BULLET FROM BARNEY'S GUN

CINCO ROBLES, on Five Oaks, started out to be a mining metropolis, but failed along with the mines. That is, it failed to be a metropolis, but continued as a cow-town. It was expected that the railroad would invade Painted Valley, but the builders had different ideas, and left Cinco Robles thirty miles away, as the crow flies. Encinas City was the nearest railroad point to the valley, also the county seat.

The streets of Cinco Robles were narrow and crooked, most of the houses guiltless of paint. Only five miles to the south was the Border, and the land of *mañana*.

Steve Kane found Doctor Smiley in his office; an old white-haired practitioner, who had ministered to the physical needs of Painted Valley ever since Cinco Robles had been established. He thrust out a hand.

"It's good to see you again, Steve."

"Yo're lookin' well, Doc. I wanted to ask you some questions about Barney Macrae."

"Go ahead, boy. You know, Barney was my friend."

"I know that, Doc—and mine. You saw him at the ranch, after he was dead, didn't you?"

Doctor Smiley nodded. "I did, Steve."

"Doc, was it suicide?"

The doctor lifted his eyes and looked full at Steve.

"That was the decision of the coroner's jury."

"What was yore personal opinion, Doc?"

"What does all this lead to, Steve?"

"God knows, Doc. Today I found a bullet-hole beside the kitchen doorway. No one at the ranch knows when it was fired. It could have been a bullet that missed a man in the front doorway. What size bullet killed Barney?"

"A forty-one, Steve."

"A forty-one, eh? The old man carried a forty-one."

"One shell had been fired, Steve. I dug out the bullet myself."

"Through his heart, Doc?"

The doctor shook his head. "Above

the heart, Steve. He miscalculated a little. It didn't kill him instantly."

"Where was the gun, when you found him, Doc?"

"Why, he had it in his right hand."

Steve looked curiously at the old doctor.

"How long could he have lived after the shot, Doc?"

"Who knows? Possibly only a minute or two—perhaps five. He bled to death internally."

"Still hangin' onto that gun?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps," he admitted. "I—would you like to see the bullet? I have it here in my desk."

He secured the bullet, which was not battered. Steve scrutinized it closely, rolled it back across the desk, and leaned back in his chair.

"Doc, that bullet was never fired out of Barney Macrae's gun."

The old doctor smiled, as he examined the bullet again.

"What makes you say it, Steve?"

Steve grunted and got to his feet.

"Doc, I can't tell you that. Who's got Barney's gun now?"

"Why, I suppose the sheriff has it. I've got the other four cartridges here in my desk."

He handed them over. Steve looked at them and laughed grimly. The old doctor gazed at him curiously, wondering what amusement could find in four forty-one cartridges.

"Now, I'll bet odds he never shot himself," said Steve. "Thanks a lot, Doc. I'll be seein' you again."

"But," protested the doctor, "tell me what it means. Remember I was acting as coroner at the time."

"Some day I'll tell you, Doc. Don't say a word about this to anybody—please. *Adios*, Doctor."

Steve rode to the Turquoise Saloon, where Elmer Mobray, the bartender, greeted him with a whoop.

"Runt Randall told me you came back," said Elmer. "Runt told me about you scarin' hell out of Manuel Rojas—too bad Omaha missed him. Have a drink, Stevie. Doggone, you shore got pale down there in jail. What are you goin' to do now—go down there and learn 'em a lesson?"

Elmer paused to catch his breath, as he shoved out the bottle.

"I'm stayin' away from *Mejico*," grinned Steve. "That place is bad medicine for me now. Well, here's how, Elmer."

"Shoot 'er into you, Steve. Here's to you."

"Too bad about Barney Macrae," said Elmer. "I shore was sad. You see, I was on that coroner's jury, Steve."

"You was, eh? Plain case of suicide, eh?"

"Oh, shore—plain as anythin'."

Steve leaned against the bar and rolled a smoke.

"I never did get it straight," he told the bartender. "The way I heard it was that Joe East and the sheriff dropped in to talk with Barney about that pinto horse."

"That's the way it was. You see, they identified the pinto as the horse that the gold was packed onto. Barney seen 'em, and headed for the house. He took one shot at 'em and ducked into the house."

"Oh, he took a shot at 'em, eh?"

"Yeah. Oh, I forgot to say that Tuck Doble was with 'em. Well, they spread out and moved in on the house, when they heard a shot fired in the house. That was when Barney shot himself. They thought he went into the house to git a rifle."

"He shot at 'em with a six-gun?"

"Yeah."

"Did anybody ever find that empty shell—the one he fired at 'em outside the house?"

"Why, I s'pose it was still in the gun, Steve."

"There was only one empty shell in that gun, Elmer."

"By golly, when I come to think of it—that's right."

"How far away was they, when he shot at 'em?"

"They was at the gate, I believe."

Steve laughed softly. "Barney could hit a tomato can at the gate."

"Well, yeah, I s'pose he could. Mebbe he was excited."

"Had Barney been to town that mornin'?"

"Not that anybody knows about."

"Then how did he knew all this evidence was against him? Did Barney Macrae ever strike you as bein' a man who would pull a job like that, and then shoot himself on suspicion?"

Elmer looked curiously at Steve and shook his head.

"Steve, you make it look a hell of a lot different than they did at the inquest. You've got me wonderin' now. I wish you'd been here. You ought to talk to Al Hickey about this."

"Mebbe I will, Elmer. Jist forget it, will you? Anyway, it's a closed case. How about another drink?"

"Wait'll I git you a clean glass. Well, here's to that pack-load of gold; and I hope you find it. There's a ten thousand dollar reward—real money."

"I couldn't use that much," laughed Steve. "Why, I wouldn't know what to do with the other nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars."

"It would be a burden," agreed Elmer.

CHAPTER VI

"DAMN TOFF JEEGER!"

TWO DAYS later Steve and Omaha met at a group of live-oaks on the edge of a mesa two miles from the L4L ranch-house. It was near sundown and both men were saddle weary. Omaha was waiting for Steve, who looked at him questioningly.

"How many?" asked Omaha.

"Two."

Omaha grinned sourly. "I'll bet I traveled forty miles, and I counted three."

They both rolled smokes from Steve's sack of tobacco, lighted off the one match, and squatted down beside a tree.

"It ain't reasonable," declared Omaha wearily. "There should be at least around three hundred cows, calves and steers. Mebbe not quite that many, but mighty close, Steve. Here we've criss-crossed this range for twelve hours, and checked five."

"Mebbe they've shifted," said Steve.

"You know they ain't. Our feed is as good as any, and the water's better. Somethin' is wrong."

"You can't steal cattle wholesale, Omaha."

"Mebbe they growed wings and flew away."

"That's it!" snorted Steve.

"Aw, they couldn't do that, Steve. Whoever heard of wings on cows?"

"Well, it was yore suggestion."

"Shucks, I was jokin'; I didn't mean it. Don't always take me so serious, Steve."

"I reckon we better drift home," said Steve. "Mebbe we'll see a flock of cows, hoverin' over a dead buzzard."

"But what are we goin' to do about these missin' cows, Steve? Don't you think we ought to notify the sheriff? He's the one who ought to know about it—seems to me."

"Mebbe we better keep still about it," suggested Steve. "We'll make another search. They might have all been bunched together, and we overlooked 'em."

"Well, yeah, they could," agreed Omaha, and they rode back to the ranch, where Mrs. Fernandez had supper waiting for them.

Carl Johnson, the lawyer, had been

at the ranch, but Mary had refused to talk business with him.

"I told him to talk with you," she told Steve.

"What did he say?" asked Steve, as he mopped his face with a towel.

Mary turned away.

"I tell you w'at he say," offered Mrs. Fernandez from the kitchen door. "He say, 'You lees'en to ignorant cowboy, and you be damn soon bosted.'"

"There might be truth in that, too," laughed Steve.

"I don't care what he said," declared Mary. "He can't force me to sell the ranch."

Steve remembered, but did not mention, the five head of cattle they had found. A cattle ranch without cattle is not a paying proposition.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens," he said.

"Mebbe we'll find all that gold," said the soapy-faced Omaha. "I'd like to have enough money to go to a city and be a dude. If we had all that money, I'd never wear anythin' but white pants and stove-pipe hats."

"You be damn queek put in jail," said Mrs. Fernandez.

"Maybe in a circus," said Steve.

"Like one them fricks," said Mrs. Fernandez. "You know w'at ees a frick?"

"You mean a freak?" asked Steve.

"Oh, sure. Like beeg fat man and a skeeny one, and theese weemen weeth wheesker. I see fricks een Tucson one time. Su-u-ure! I see one man swallow boocher knives."

"Aw-w-w-w!" grunted Omaha. "Swaller butcher knives."

After supper Omaha went to Cinco Robles. Mary and Mrs. Fernandez decided to clean up Barney Macrae's room, which had not been used since his death, and make a few changes.

Steve was restless. He realized that he had made a bitter enemy in Joe East, that others would be gunning for his scalp. He recognized odds. Joe East had plenty of men to do his bidding. And there was Manuel Rojas, close to the powers that be of Agua Frio, and apparently friendly with the Quarter Circle JHE. Sheriff Al Hickey had been friendly with Joe East for a long time; so Steve could look for little help.

He lighted a lamp in the bunk-house and tried to read, but the air was hot and muggy. He went down to the stable, back to the house, finally sat down against the gnarled trunk of a big sycamore beside the bunk-house wall. Only a few feet away was the lighted window of the bunk-house. It was a peculiar-looking window. The upper half was of four panes, while the lower half, set in a home-made frame, was of one piece of thick glass, taken from a door of an old stage coach. It had been sun-tinted and sand-scoured, until it was nearly opaque.

The tree trunk was between Steve and the window. As he sat there, thinking about the missing cattle, a slight sound came. Slowly turning his head he saw a man creeping toward the window.

The man dodged in below the window, hesitated in a crouch, straightened slightly to peer through the lower pane. Steve saw him cup his two hands beside his cheeks.

Slowly Steve came erect and moved around the tree. Apparently the man was unable to see through the glass. He straightened up to look over the top of it.

Steve stepped in behind him, making only a slight sound, but the man turned quickly. A flash of Manuel Rojas' face spurred Steve's fist. Rojas fell in a whimpering heap.

Steve took his collar, dragged him around the corner and into the bunk-house, where he flung him sprawling in the middle of the floor. Rojas was gasping, blubbering, trying to get up. Steve stood there and watched. He wondered

how the man had found the courage to come alone—if he had come alone.

"Now yo're here, Rojas," said Steve, "I'm goin' to choke some information out of you."

As he leaned over quickly toward Rojas, splinters of glass slashed his hat, a shot rang out. With a sweep of his arm Steve knocked the lamp to the floor, dived straight for the open doorway, and went sliding across the yard, like a baseball player diving for a bag.

He came to his hands and knees, searching the darkness. A man was running toward the stable. Steve headed after him, gun in hand. He heard the thud of running hoofs and saw the dim shape of horse and rider thumping along the fence toward the main road.

Steve threw up his gun and fired twice. The flares of the forty-five blinded him momentarily. He dropped to one knee, listening. There was no sound. He plunged back toward the bunk-house.

Mary and Mrs. Fernandez were calling from the house. Now another tattoo beat out into the night. Another horse was running somewhere.

Steve swore, and called out, "I'm all right. Nobody hurt."

He walked into the bunk-house and lighted a match, knowing it was of no use. Rojas was gone. He went to the house, and told what had happened. Mary Macrae's eyes were large, excited. She said nothing, only followed his words.

"You know sometheeng?" said Mrs. Fernandez. "I hear firs' shot. I hopen front door and I hear man ronning. Then I hear 'orse ronning. *Madre de Dios!* I hear two shoots—bam, bam! I tell you, theese 'orse got keeled!"

"Are you sure of that?" demanded Steve.

"Su-u-u-ure! I hear theese man say, 'Curse!' and then he don't say notheeng."

"What does it all mean, Steve?" asked Mary.

"Oh, I suppose some of the boys are gettin' kinda playful."

"Murder isn't playful."

"Well, I suppose it can be carried too far. But all they've got to show for their work is a busted window, which ain't so much. I reckon I better take a lantern and see if I did hit that horse or rider."

"Oh, be careful, Steve," begged Mary. "They might be waiting for you out there in the dark."

"I'm afraid they won't be," he said ruefully.

He went out with a lantern. But he did not light it, until he had discovered the dead horse. It was a blue-roan, wearing several indistinct brands, its wet skin still showing the marks of a saddle which had been stripped from its dead body. The bullet had broken its neck; and Steve visualized the fall its rider must have taken. However, the rider was not injured, the missing saddle attesting to the fact that he had been able to take it off and carry it away.

Steve went back and told the women about the dead horse.

"This ees getting to be toff place," declared Mrs. Fernandez.

"Plenty," agreed Steve, grinning. He walked to the doorway of the room they had been cleaning.

"We wanted to move that bed around, but it was too heavy," said Mary. "We want to turn it around against that north wall."

Steve managed to swing it to the desired spot. There were several old pieces of paper on the floor, which Mrs. Fernandez proceeded to sweep up. Steve glanced at one piece, took it from the dust-pan and looked at it.

"What's this?" he grunted softly, going closer to the lamp.

It was a piece of old wrapping paper, smeared and dirty, but bearing some crude letters done in a brown sub-

stance. There was the word WELL, followed by what seemed to be JE-KILLED, which ended in a smear.

"What is it?" asked Mary. She came closer and he showed it to her. She read it as one word, WELLJEKILLED.

Steve sat down on the edge of the bed, in grim thought.

"I believe it's blood," he said slowly. "Could Barney Macrae have lived long enough to have tried to write a message in his own blood, I wonder?"

"How would it get under the bed?" asked Mary, with a shudder.

Steve stepped to the doorway, glanced into the main room, nodded and turned to Mary.

"They found him out there," he said. "Barney liked plenty of air, and he always kept that back window open. Wind from that front door could have blown that paper into here and under the bed."

"But the message doesn't mean anything."

"Mebbe—mebbe not. I'll see if Doc Smiley can tell me if it's blood. It sure looks like it."

"I don' like blood," declared Mrs. Fernandez. "'Course I like heem in my eenside, but not on my houtsides."

"Well," smiled Steve, "I guess the excitement is over for the night; so we may as well go to bed, folks. Good night."

"I think he is nice," said Mary, after Steve closed the kitchen door.

"Nice?" Mrs. Fernandez smiled slowly. "I don' know about heem being nice, but he ees damn toff jeeger, wheech ees wort' more than twenty nice man."

CHAPTER VII

JOE EAST—EAR KNOCKER

OMAHA came home later and listened to Steve's story, and looked at the broken window.

"It's too bad you didn't zing a couple bullets through Rojas," he sighed.

Omaha insisted then on seeing the dead horse. He grinned over it.

"I know that *caballo*, Steve. It's one that Tuck Doble was ridin'."

"And Tuck Doble is one of Joe East's gunmen," mused Steve. "Well, we can't prove that Tuck Doble was ridin' the animal; so that's that."

"I seen Joe East in Cinco Robles," informed Omaha. "He was havin' a drink with Al Hickey and Runt Randall."

"That's one of the things that make it tough for us," sighed Steve. "Joe East is a friend of Al Hickey; so the law is out, as far as us expectin' it to help us in any way. Runt Randall never did play any favorites—but he's only Hickey's hired hand."

"Let's go to bed," suggested Omaha. "I never could think good late at night this away."

"How do you make out in the daytime?"

"Well, I do quite a little guessin'."

Steve tore a corner off the smeared paper and took it to Doctor Smiley, who pronounced it blood. He was curious to know what Steve's idea was, but Steve declined to state. There were a number of horses at the Turquoise hitch-rack, but Steve paid no attention to them. He stepped into the saloon, where Joe East, Al Hickey, Runt Randall and Tuck Doble were having a drink.

Runt Randall was the only one of the four who saw Steve, who had stopped behind them. Runt winked at Steve and turned his back, as he said:

"I wonder what Steve Kane will do, if the L4L is sold."

"That knot-headed slick-ear!" snorted Joe East. "I hope somebody kicks him into the deepest hole in the state. In fact, I'd like to be the one who does the kickin'. And they can do the same thing to that ignorant, bat-eared Omaha Oglesby."

Al Hickey caught Steve's reflection in

the back-bar mirror, and lowered his glass slowly.

"Steve Kane thinks he's a bad man," continued Joe. "Hah! Some day, I'm goin' to take pleasure in knockin' his ears down."

Runt Randall was almost in convulsions. His lips were shut tightly, but tears were running down his flat cheeks. Joe East looked at him curiously, shifted his eyes to Tuck Doble, who had turned his head and was staring at Steve. Then Joe East turned slowly and saw the man he had been discussing.

"My ears are stickin' straight up, East," said Steve calmly, "and today is just as good a time as any for you to start knockin' 'em down."

Joe East swallowed heavily. He was much bigger than Steve Kane, but he wished he was miles away from there. Steve stepped in closer, and Al Hickey started to lift a protesting hand, but Runt pulled it away.

"Now, wait!" snapped the sheriff, but it was too late. Steve drove his right fist square into Joe East's face, knocking the big cattleman back against the bar. East threw both arms across his face, and Steve's swift uppercut landed square in the arch of his ribs. It was a finishing punch. Steve stepped back, keeping an eye on Tuck Doble.

"Anybody got any objections to what I done?" he asked.

Al Hickey whirled on Runt Randall.

"Damn it, you started all this!" he declared. "You seen Steve there, and you had to start somethin'."

"Well," choked Runt. "you'll have to admit that I done a good job. I didn't have anythin' to do about the remarks Joe made. I've always said that a loose tongue caused a hell of a lot of busted noses."

"You better spread him out and let me dump some water on him," said the bartender. "He seems to be havin' air troubles."

Hickey and Doble dragged East away from the bar, and the bartender swabbed his face with a wet towel.

"You better pull out of here, Kane," said Hickey.

"Hardly. He might still be in an ear-knockin' frame of mind. I believe in givin' a man all the chance in the world to make good."

"Yo're always startin' trouble."

"I'm sensitive about my ears, and I hate to have people kick me into deep holes."

"I guess he's kinda sick," said Doble. The sheriff nodded.

"Have him stick out his tongue and say, 'A-a-a-ah,' " suggested Runt.

"Will you ever show any sense?" wailed the sheriff.

"I've often wondered that m'self," replied Runt. "Why don't we take hold of his feet and head and give a quick jerk? If he's got a half-hitch in his big intestine, we could loosen it, before it gits set."

They helped East to a sitting position and wiped the blood off his face. He looked at them in a dazed way, shook his head wearily and felt his swollen nose.

"You got hit, Joe," informed Tuck Doble.

"That ort to cheer him up a lot," observed Runt. "He knows now that it wasn't a tornader nor a earthquake."

They helped East into a chair, where he sagged weakly. The solar-plexus punch had robbed him of all his strength.

"You might tell him that my ears were still in place, when I went out," said Steve, and left the saloon.

East recovered slowly, and Doble went to get Doctor Smiley, who came and examined East, who was able to talk a little. Smiley assured him that he would soon shake off the effects of the blow, and explained about the solar-plexus being a nerve center.

"Steve Kane must be all solar-plexus then," said Hickey.

"That's about the first funny thing I ever heard you say," remarked Runt.

"It won't be the last one. You started all this trouble, shootin' off yore face about Steve Kane; and him there all the time, listenin'. Damn it, you knew he was there!"

Runt looked curiously at the sheriff for several moments.

"Well, why don't you say somethin'?" asked Hickey.

"I was jist wonderin', Al."

"Wonderin' what?"

"Wonderin' how far yo're goin' with that sort of talk. You see, I'm not a relative of yours—merely a hired man. If I was a relative, I'd be bound in blood ties. Whether I started this trouble, or not, I'm tired of havin' you remind me of it, Al. Anyway, Joe East is big enough to take care of himself, if you ask me."

Runt snorted audibly and walked out of the saloon.

"That's what I have to contend with," sighed the sheriff. "Have a drink, Doc?"

"I suppose it is about the right time of day for one, Al."

Tuck Doble accepted the invitation, but Joe East was obliged to decline. He went outside and sat down in front of the saloon.

"Steve Kane is a peculiar boy," said the doctor. "Today he brought me a scrap of old wrapping paper, smeared with some brown substance, which he asked me to test and see if it was blood. Apparently it was quite an old stain."

"Human blood, Doc?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, I merely tested it. I presume it was human blood. Do you know, Al, that boy swears that Barney Macrae did not kill himself."

"He does, eh? On what grounds, Doc?"

"I don't know. He says he can prove it."

Al Hickey laughed shortly. "I'll have to see him about that."

"If Aguilar ever gets his hands on him, he won't care how Macrae died," said Doble. "He's sure sore about that jail in Agua Frio."

"I heard about that," nodded the doctor. "It seems that Aguilar was going to execute Steve for the murder of a man who wasn't even sick."

"That's Steve's story," said Doble. "I reckon Aguilar was tryin to scare Kane."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I—I s'pose he had a reason."

"Possibly," said the doctor dryly, as he picked up his medicine case and left the saloon.

Doble and the sheriff went out to Joe East, who indicated a desire to go home.

"You are lookin' kinda peaked, Joe," admitted the sheriff.

"I'm not through," said East huskily. "I ain't even started."

"Don't tell me. I'm the law, you must remember."

"All right," growled East. "C'mon, Tuck."

CHAPTER VIII

TWO HUNDRED POUNDS OF GOLD

STEVE was not a little disgusted with himself, as he rode back to the ranch, nursing some sore knuckles. The fight had not accomplished anything, except to cause more bitterness.

"I guess I'll never have any sense," he told himself. "I tell Omaha he's the dumbest cowpuncher that ever lived—and I go out and do more crazy things than Omaha ever heard about."

He concealed his sore knuckles from Mary, as he told her about Doctor Smiley's test of the blood smear. Omaha had been out on the south range, looking for cattle, but his report was negative. He saw Steve bathing his sore hand; so Steve had to tell him what happened.

"You have all the fun," complained

Omaha. "Let me hit 'em next time, will you? I can hit real good."

"I'm not goin' to do any more hittin'," declared Steve, looking with a critical eye at his bruised hand.

Al Hickey and Runt Randall rode in on their way back to Encinas City, and Hickey asked Steve about the statement he had made to the doctor.

"Let that pass," advised Steve. "I can't prove a thing—yet."

"I want to know," insisted Hickey.

"I'm not tellin' you, so what do you know about that? And I don't mind tellin' you why I won't tell you anythin'. You and Joe East are close friends, while me and East are enemies. That's all right with me, Al. Any man has a right to his friends."

"But I'm the sheriff."

"I didn't vote for you, Al."

"I did," grunted Omaha. "That damn rubber-stamp X slipped—and they wouldn't let me have another of them sheets of paper."

"We might as well go home," chuckled Runt. "Anyway, I wouldn't talk to a man who didn't vote for me, Al—nor to one who voted for me by accident."

"Well," said Hickey grudgingly, "the law says Barney Macrae killed himself; so that verdict goes as it lays."

"Then why argue with me about it?" grinned Steve. "Why don't you go out and find that two hundred pounds of gold? It must be here in the valley."

"Barney Macrae knows where it is. That is, he did know."

"Bull!" snorted Steve.

"C'mon, Al," laughed Runt. "We're wastin' our time."

They rode away and the two cowboys watched them go down the main highway, until the brush cut off the view.

"He said that Barney knowed where that gold was!' exclaimed Omaha.

Steve's eyes narrowed thoughtfully for several moments.

"I wonder if he did. By golly, I wonder. Omaha, you went to a dance in Encinas City that night, didn't you?"

"Sure."

"Didja go alone?"

"Nope. Me and Bill Prince and Tuck Doble went together. We framed it up two, three days before. Man, I shore got drunk."

"Uh-huh. Me in jail, you in Encinas, and the cook in Cinco Robles."

"I drunk brandy," said Omaha. "Whee! That stuff's powerful. I thought the railroad track was a ladder. Skinned my chin pretty bad, too."

"Did you climb very high?"

"All the way from the depot to the section house. That's where my hands slipped. It's shore awful—gettin' drunk around a railroad track, Steve. So many humps and bumps to fall over."

"I reckon it's mealtime,' said Steve. "I see Mrs. Fernandez out there, lookin' for the gong-hammer."

AFTER another day of search for L4L cattle, which proved that there were not two dozen of them left on the Painted Valley range, Steve went to Mary and told her about it. They sat down together and he made her understand that the L4L outfit had very likely been looted.

She admitted that there was less than two hundred dollars in the bank, and said she owed a month's salary to Mrs. Fernandez and to Omaha Oglesby.

"What on earth am I going to do, Steve?"

"That's sort of a hard question to answer."

"But isn't there some way to bring those thieves to justice; to make them give back my cattle?"

"If we knew who they were—and could prove it—yes. The cattle might be in Mexico—and probably are. We can't go to Mexico and get them."

"Couldn't the sheriff do something, Steve?"

Steve laughed shortly. "He'd arrest anybody that we could prove had stolen the cattle. Al Hickey ain't a detective. He couldn't find a dishpan in a gunny-sack—especially if the dishpan was his friend."

"Isn't there any justice down here, Steve?"

"Justice? No, Mary, I'm afraid we won't find any. We've got to fight it out alone."

"But the odds are against us."

"Physical odds. Do you know, Mary, I've often wondered if I've got any brains. Sometimes I have the brightest ideas, but there's always parts missin'. Mebbe it ain't brains at all—just hunches. Anyway, here's a mighty good chance for me to find out for my own satisfaction."

"What are you going to do, Steve?" she asked anxiously.

Steve laughed grimly and got to his feet.

"I'm goin' to set a trap. But don't expect much—it prob'ly won't work."

Steve went down to the lean-to, where they did crude blacksmithing, and drew the bullet from a forty-five cartridge. With a small file and a piece of sandpaper, he fixed it to his satisfaction, after which he pocketed the bullet.

An old Quarter-Circle JHE cow and calf were bawling around the corral, trying to get at the watering trough; so Steve opened the gate and let them in.

"You can't help it if yore owner is mean," he told them.

He leaned against the fence and watched them drink deeply. The calf had been range branded, and the Quarter-Circle JHE was not at all symmetrical. The Quarter-Circle was a lop-sided half-circle, and the combined JHE had been crudely printed. Steve looked closely at the brand on the old cow, and noticed that some of it showed fresh scabs. There was no other brand on the animal.

Steve turned them loose and went back to the bunk-house, where he found Mary in the doorway, talking with Omaha.

"I was telling him just how we are fixed financially," she explained to Steve.

"That's all right with me," said Omaha. "Shucks, I don't need any money. I've still got over four dollars left—and that's a lot of money."

"Don't worry about money, as far as Omaha and me are concerned," Steve told her.

"Mrs. Fernandez said the same thing," replied Mary.

"We'll hang on until the last dog is hung," declared Omaha. "All I ask is a chance to do a little fightin'. I've kinda been cheated lately."

"You'll prob'ly get plenty chances," said Steve. He turned to Mary.

"Will you ask Mrs. Fernandez if there's anythin' she needs? I'm ridin' to Cinco Robles."

Omaha followed Steve down to the stable.

"I'm ridin' in with you, Steve," he said.

"Yo're stayin' right here. I'm not on any warpath this evenin'—and I don't want you to forget that a couple of killers failed on their last trip here. Keep yore eyes open, feller."

Steve mounted his horse, rode up to the house to talk with Mary about the cook's needs, and then started toward the back of the ranch.

"I thought you was goin' to town!" called Omaha.

"I'm not ridin' any roads. *Hasta luego.*"

"*Vaya con Dios,*" called Mary.

He turned and waved at her and a few moments later disappeared in the gathering dusk.

"You act like you was worried," said Omaha. "Shucks, you mustn't worry."

"That is easy to say," replied Mary.

"Well," drawled Omaha, "Steve's twenty-two, twenty-three years old, and he ain't been killed yet."

"There is always a first time, Omaha."

"You ain't stuck on Steve, are you?"

"Why, no, I'm not," said Mary in surprise.

"I think he's stuck on you, Mary. Steve's a fine feller, and yo're awful pretty. I never seen any eyes like yours. Well, yore whole face is pretty, as far as that goes; and you're awful nice. You've got nerve, too. By golly, you shore surprised me, when you pointed that shotgun at Steve that night. But he looked awful, didn't he?"

"Terrible. He frightened me."

"Well, don't worry about Steve. If he can't talk himself out of a tight spot, he shore can shoot himself loose. Me, I start shootin' right off the bat."

"Well, I can only pray that nothing happens to him."

"Do you say prayers?" asked Omaha.

"Every night. Don't you, Omaha?"

"Well, I—" faltered Omaha, "I suppose I do skip a night, here and there. You see, I only learned one prayer; the one about now I lay me down to sleep. You know that one? But it seems such a cock-eyed thing to tell the Lord, when anybody'd know that's what I was goin' to do. Anyway, I don't reckon a cowpuncher's prayers ever got him much.

"I worked with a prayin' puncher oncet, down in New Mexico. He sure could ask for lots of things. I never did see a feller who could ask for more things. But he never seemed to git what he asked for; so one day he picked up the end of a rope and rode away with it—and they hung him."

"For taking a rope?"

"Well, there was another man's horse on the other end of it."

"I believe that is just a joke," laughed Mary.

"I hope to tell you, it wasn't. I got blisters on my hands, diggin' his last restin' place. Chuck Reed, a bartender, who shore could write nice things, painted on the head-board:

"Here lies Ed Hope,
Just hopeless clay
From a sticky rope
On the First of May."

"What is a sticky rope?" asked Mary.

"That's what we call it, when a feller steals horses. His rope sticks to every good horse he finds."

Mrs. Fernandez came out to them, bringing a *serape* for Mary to put around her shoulders.

"I was just coming in, anyway," said Mary, after thanking her for the wrap.

"I'll go with you," said Omaha. "I want that shotgun."

"You going shoot sometheeng?" asked Mrs. Fernandez.

"If somethin' comes, I'm not delicate."

CHAPTER IX

ONE MEXICAN—WATERSOAKED

STEVE went straight to Doctor Smiley's home, where he found the old doctor in his easy chair, reading a medical journal.

"Anything new, Steve?"

"Not a thing, Doc. I wondered if you'd let me examine that bullet and them cartridges again."

"Certainly."

They went into the little office, where the doctor opened his desk and busied himself with other things, while Steve made his examination. He handed the cartridges back to the doctor, who put them back in his desk drawer.

"I wish you'd tell me what it is all about, Steve," said the doctor.

"Some day I will, Doc."

"And about the blood on that paper?"

"Mebbe I can tell you at the same time."

"How is Miss Macrae coming along with the ranch?"

"Well, she ain't had much time to get organized yet, Doc."

"No, it takes time. She seems like a sweet girl."

"She sure is," agreed Steve warmly.

"But hardly the type to be running a cattle ranch, Steve."

"Oh, she'll learn."

The old doctor chuckled softly, and Steve looked at him.

"Oh, nothing," replied the doctor, in answer to Steve's unspoken question. "I like you, Steve; and I hope everything turns out fine."

"I have always tried to play a square game, Doc; but the cards are kinda stacked against me this time. A couple of dry-gulchers tried to get me at the ranch—in the dark. One was Rojas. I believe that nearly every one of the L4L cattle have been stolen; and are now in Mexico, I suppose. Anyway, they're gone."

"Why, that is bad! I had no idea such things were going on, Steve. Does Hickey know this?"

"Why waste time, Doc? He works for his friends."

"Go to Encinas City and put it up to the prosecuting attorney."

"And have him turn the case over to Hickey?"

"Hm-m-m-m-m. Yes, I can see your angle. What can I do, Steve?"

"Say nothing about it. I'm just a fool cowpuncher, workin' in the dark. I'll prob'ly be sunk from the weight of lead in my carcass, before I get far; but I'm goin' somewhere."

"If I can ever help you, Steve—don't forget, I'll do it."

"Thank you, Doc. *Buenas noches.* Is the back door unlocked?"

"Why—yes, it is."

"Sit still; I know my way out, Doc."

The doctor smiled and went back to his easy chair. Five minutes later he heard a noise out in front of the house, but it was not repeated; so he finished his reading and went to bed.

The next morning, shortly after daylight, he was awakened by the young man who handled the night-shift of the livery stable.

"Yes?" queried the old doctor, opening a front window.

"I've got a job for you, Doc," said the young man. "It's a funny deal. This mornin' I found a feller, all tied up and gagged, settin' in the waterin'-trough in front of the stable. I think he's been smacked on the head, and been a-settin' in that water all night."

"Is he alive?"

"Yeah—but he's awful damned water-soaked, Doc."

"I'll be right with you, William. Do you know who he is?"

"Yeah, he's a Mexican. Name's Manuel Rojas."

"Amphibian, eh?" said the doctor, dryly.

"No—Mexican."

Manuel Rojas was a sorry sight. Quite a crowd had collected at the stable by the time Doctor Smiley arrived. Apparently Rojas had been struck over the head, knocked out, tied up and immersed in the none-too-clean watering-trough. He was entirely conscious, able to move about, but refused to talk. As soon as the doctor finished with him, he mounted his horse and headed for Agua Frio.

The slugging of Rojas was rather a mystery, except to Doctor Smiley, who realized what had happened. Rojas had been waiting for Steve to come out the front door, probably with the intention of murdering him, and Steve had turned the tables on him.

Late that afternoon the sheriff and deputy came back to Cinco Robles, and the sheriff went down to see Doctor Smiley. He had heard what happened to Rojas, and he felt sure that either Steve or Omaha was responsible for it; but no one seemed to have seen either of the L4L cowboys in town.

"Rojas wasn't badly hurt," said the doctor. "I don't imagine it was very

pleasant, sitting in that water all night, though."

"Looks like some more of Steve Kane's work," said Hickey.

"Not a bad job," said the doctor. "Steve's trouble is a too great sense of humor. Rojas tried to kill him a night or two ago—and all he did was to knock Rojas out. No doubt Rojas attacked him again last night—if Steve really did that job of immersion. I'm merely stating what Steve would probably do."

"I see. By the way, Doc, have you still got that bullet you dug out of Macrae, and them four extra shells?"

"Yes, I have, Al."

"Lemme have 'em, will yuh? I'm tryin' to figure out how Kane got his fool idea that Macrae was murdered, instead of bein' a suicide."

The doctor gave him the articles, and he went away. A little later the sheriff joined Runt Randall in the Turquoise Saloon.

"What did you find out, Al?" asked the big deputy.

"Not a thing."

Hickey produced the bullet and four cartridges. Runt looked at them closely and handed them back to the sheriff.

"All wrong," he said. "Barney Macrae was killed with a forty-one; and these are all forty-fives."

"By God, that's right! I'm goin' back to see Doc about it."

But there were no forty-one cartridges nor bullets in the doctor's desk.

"But, damn it, these ain't the ones, Doc!" snapped the sheriff.

"I can see that," admitted the doctor, "but I haven't any others."

"You've been robbed."

"Perhaps I have. It seems to be a habit around this valley lately."

"What do you mean by that remark, Doc?"

"Let it pass, Al."

The sheriff turned to the door, but came back to the desk.

"I was just wonderin' if Steve Kane got them forty-one's, Doc."

"You might ask him," suggested the doctor.

"Yeah, I reckon I will. So-long, Doc."

CHAPTER X

SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR

THINGS drifted along quietly for the next few days, but Steve did not relax his vigilance. There was little for him and Omaha to do, except the chores around the ranch-house. Steve had told Omaha of his encounter with Rojas in front of the doctor's home; but did not tell Mary. Just out of curiosity he took Mary to town and had her go to Carl Johnson's office to see if Joe East still wanted to buy the L4L; but Johnson smugly informed her that Mr. East was not in the market for the ranch.

Steve met Doctor Smiley on the street, and the doctor mentioned the fact that the sheriff had asked for the bullet and cartridges.

"Later he came back and declared that the cartridges were forty-five caliber, instead of forty-one," said the doctor.

"That's funny," replied Steve seriously. "Why, I believe the ones I looked at were forty-fives, Doc."

"That's right! Come to think of it, I believe they were. I suppose you heard about Rojas."

"Oh, yeah. Cleanliness may be next to godliness, Doc, but I'd hate to spend all night in a trough of water."

"Some people do get strange ideas, Steve. Well, I must be on my way."

Steve and Mary were still in town, when the stage came in from Encinas City, bringing Al Hickey and a stranger; a tall, hard-faced person, who seemed to look with a cynical eye upon Cinco Robles.

Steve was curious enough to go over

to the hotel, where Hickey introduced the man as Ross Bender.

"Bender is a special investigator for Wells-Fargo," explained the sheriff. "He's in here to look things over, Steve."

"Lookin' for gold, eh?"

"You know, they had three men in here for a couple of weeks," said the sheriff.

"I wasn't here," smiled Steve. "Who were they?"

"Their names was Adams, Greer and Sims."

Steve shook his head. "I don't know any of 'em. Mr. Bender, is Henry Green still the head of the investigation bureau?"

"Yes, he's still there."

"I suppose Johnny Turner is still on the force."

"Johnny? Yes," smiled Bender, "he's still with us."

"Come out to the L4L," invited Steve. "Be glad to see you any time."

"I'll prob'ly be out there. Thanks, Kane."

Steve left the hotel, walked to the front of the post-office, where he leaned against a porch-post and wiped some tears from his eyes. The old pastmaster, standing in the doorway, eyed Steve closely.

"Have you got hay-fever, Steve?" he inquired.

"Somethin' like that." Steve walked away, looking back at the front of the hotel, where Al Hickey and Ross Bender were talking.

"Mamma mine!" choked Steve. "That hard-faced hombre is a bigger liar than I am. I never heard of Henry Green nor Johnny Turner—and neither did he. Mr. Bender, if that's yore name, you'll bear watchin'."

Steve was thoughtful as he drove Mary back to the ranch in the rickety buckboard. He was trying to puzzle out just why a psuedo detective should be in Cinco Robles. Bender had all the earmarks of a gunman.

Encinas City was the shipping point for all Painted Valley cattle, and every brand would have to be checked by the sheriff's office. Steve hated to think that Al Hickey was crooked; but it began to look as though Hickey was either that, or so dumb that he would let crooks pull the wool over his eyes.

They were half-way home, when Mary said:

"You haven't spoken a word since we left town, Steve."

"Huh? I'm sorry, Mary; I was thinkin'."

"I've been thinking, too, Steve; thinking that the day of my departure is growing closer and closer."

"You mean—you'll go away—give up the L4L, Mary?"

"What else can I do? It isn't self-supporting, and no one wants to buy it. Steve, I hated Arizona, when I came here; but now—"

"I know how you feel, Mary. It gets in yore blood. And you've got enough of Barney Macrae's blood in you to make you want to fight."

"I suppose that is true; but to fight what? Oh, it isn't the ranch so much."

"No?"

"I'd be willing to give it up, if I could prove that my old dad didn't rob that train—and didn't shoot himself. You don't realize what that would mean to me."

"Yeah, I believe I do, Mary. Aw, if I wasn't just a dumb cowpuncher, I might be able to do somethin'."

"You are not dumb, Steve. You've been wonderful to me, and I shall always appreciate it. Right now you are risking your life to try and help me. Oh, I know. I've talked with Omaha and Mrs. Fernandez. Omaha told me about you and Manuel Rojas; told me how Rojas tried to kill you in front of the doctor's home."

"The dumb son-of-a-gun!"

"Even if he is dumb, he is dangerous, Steve."

"Aw, I mean Omaha. I told him not to tell you. But I guess it's all right. Yes, Rojas *is* dangerous, Mary. I'd have been within my rights, if I had killed him. But I don't believe Rojas is doin' all this for personal revenge. Somebody is behind his deviltry. And if I kill Rojas, I'll never know who it was."

"Are Mexicans really treacherous, Steve? Mrs. Fernandez is the only one I've ever known."

"They're not any more treacherous than any other race, Mary. In fact, the better class of Mexicans are wonderful people. Lack of education, lack of any chance to better themselves, has caused the peon class. Mebbe they lack ambition. We get the worst of 'em along the Border. Rojas is a sample. He's only part Mexican, though. But if Rojas was left alone, he'd prob'ly never do anythin' worse than steal a horse or knife a friend in a drunken brawl. Mary, it's white men—not Mexicans. They're only tools, that's all."

"I think Mrs. Fernandez is wonderful," said Mary.

"She shore is. She's an Arizona-Mexican, and her folks date back to the early days in California. She went to school. Her husband went down to try and liberate Mexico, I understand; and he never came back."

"She told me about that. It was very sad."

"Not the way she tells it," laughed Steve.

Ross Bender came out to the ranch next morning, driving a hired vehicle. Steve and Omaha were in the bunkhouse, and did not see him. He introduced himself to Mary, told her what his business was, and proceeded to question her closely. Mrs. Fernandez, not knowing exactly what it was all about, came out to tell Steve.

"I theenk theese man want know too damn much."

Steve hurried through the kitchen and walked in on them.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Bender," said Steve. "I didn't see you come."

"You are Steve Kane, I believe. Oh, yes, I can see you better now; you had your back to the light."

Steve sat down near Mary and smiled at Bender.

"I sent a letter to Henry Green last night," he lied. "I told him you was on the job over here. Henry is an old *amigo* of mine, Bender."

"I see," said Bender slowly. "You wrote him, eh?"

"Yeah. I thought he'd like to know you was on the job."

"I see. Well, that was nice of you, Kane."

"Yo're a liar," thought Steve, but aloud he asked:

"Havin' any luck?"

"Well, I haven't really started yet. I was askin' Miss Macrae some questions. I didn't know you were here; so I asked her if she had any idea of your reasons for not believing that her father shot himself."

"You might, at least, have waited and asked me the question, Bender."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"I couldn't answer his question, Steve," said Mary.

"And I wouldn't," added Steve.

Bender smiled thinly. "Al Hickey warned me of that."

"What else did he say about me?"

"Oh, nothing—except that you were tight-mouthed."

"Well, you can go back and tell him he was right, Bender. I won't tell Hickey anythin'; and I won't tell you anythin', until I hear from Henry Green. I've only got yore word for the fact that yo're a Wells-Fargo special detective."

"Well, I guess I could show you credentials."

"I don't want to see 'em; I want Henry's word for Ross Bender."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about

it, there's no use of me wasting my time out here," said Bender, getting to his feet. "I'm very glad to have met you, Miss Macrae. Good afternoon."

He walked from the house, climbed into the buggy and drove away, without a backward look.

Steve glanced at Mary.

"Some of 'em don't have rattles," he said meaningly.

"You mean, he isn't who he says he is, Steve?"

"He may be *who* he says he is—but he's not *what* he says he is, Mary."

"He isn't? Steve, are you a mind-reader?"

"Well, I'll bet Mr. Bender thinks I am," laughed Steve.

CHAPTER XI

DRY-GULCHED

THE Quarter-Circle JHE ranch, located about three miles north of Cinco Robles, was rather a pretentious group of half-adobe, half-frame buildings, beautifully located in a grove of large sycamores. Most of the furniture was home-made, the interior walls of yellowed plaster, the floors bare of rugs.

Today Joe East sat at the end of a huge table in the main room, his folded arms resting on the table, his deep-set eyes narrowed, as he looked at Manuel Rojas who leaned against the table. Rojas' eyes were red, as was his nose. Evidently he was suffering from a head-cold.

"So you think yo're all through, do you, Rojas?" queried East.

"*Dios,* yes."

"Yo're yaller, Rojas."

"*Madre de Dios!* All night I seet een water, weeth my *cabeza* bosted. You theenk that ees yellow? You know what I'm theenk?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm theenk you bite off more than I can chew."

"So yo're scared of Steve Kane, eh?"

"Sure. One time hees damn near keel me weeth a gon. Another time hees almos' break my cheen. This time, he damn close to drown me. You theenk I am crazee? I'm queet."

"Goin' to quit, eh? The hell you are! If you do, don't never come back to Cinco Robles; and keep away from Agua Frio—if you want to live."

"Sure. Eeef I don' queet, I damn soon get keeled, anyway. Theese Stif Kane ees not goin' be damn fool all hees life."

Tuck Doble stepped into the room and called to East:

"Here comes some jigger in a top-buggy, Joe."

East ignored Rojas further, and walked out on the porch as Bender drove up. Doble tied the horse and Bender followed East into the house. Bender had been out there the night before.

"I thought you told me that Steve Kane was a dumb cow-poke," said Bender.

"He is. Sit down, Ross."

Bender sat down beside the table and viciously bit the end from a cigar.

"Well, it's your mstake. You should have found out that Kane is a friend of the head of the investigation bureau for Wells-Fargo."

"He's what?" snorted East.

"You heard what I said."

"I don't believe it. How would he—wait a minute. What's all this about, anyway?"

Bender explained as much as he could.

"I didn't know this feller Green, the head of the bureau; but I had to admit that I did. What the hell—I was up against it."

East looked at Bender for several moments.

"Mebbe we did slip a little," he said slowly.

"I'd tell a man, we slipped a little. How would I know that some ignorant

cow-poke would know the head of the outfit I'm supposed to be with?"

"Well, we're still safe. Suppose he does know him?"

"He wrote him a letter. Said he wanted to be sure I'm what I said I was. Now, how does it look to you?"

East laughed softly, but with little mirth.

"It'll take several days to get a reply, Ross. In the meantime, almost anything can happen. Go to Doc Smiley. Tell him who you are, and see what he knows. He might tell you. I want to know what Kane is workin' on."

"Bull! Why not load this jigger up with lead and sink him in a prospect hole?"

Joe East turned his head and looked at Manuel Rojas, who was in the doorway, looking back at them, as he puffed a cigaret.

"What do you think of that, Rojas?" he asked.

Rojas shrugged his shoulders and blew a cloud of smoke through his sore nostrils.

"I'm theenk hees jus' one more damn fool," replied Rojas, and walked down to the stable to get his horse.

East, Doble and Bender were on the veranda, as Rojas rode away, going toward Cinco Robles. Rojas was ignorant, but he realized that in breaking with Joe East, he was also breaking with the powers that be in Agua Frio. In other words, Manuel Rojas would be obliged to move his place of residence, if he wanted to save his own skin.

He went to Cinco Robles, imbibed several drinks of tequilla, sat down for a serious contemplation of his predicament, but finally mounted his horse and took the road that led to Encinas City.

Steve and Omaha were starting from the stable toward the house, when Rojas rode boldly up to them. Steve swore softly, wondering what this move might mean. Rojas lifted his hands shoulder high, as he came up to them, and the two cowboys eyed him closely.

"*Buenas dias,*" he said, grinning.

"Just what are you up to now, Rojas?" asked Steve.

"Gotta lot of nerve, I'll say that," added Omaha.

"I'm 'ave ver' bad cold in my *cabeza.* I theenk I get heem een that water."

"Yeah, I reckon you did, Rojas. But why are you here?"

"I am ver' seek. Today I queet Joe East. He ees ver' mad, and hees say, 'You never go back to Agua Frio, and you keep hout from Cinco Robles, or I 'ave you keel awful damn dead.' "

"Yea-a-ah?" drawled the doubting Steve. "Just why didja quit Joe East?"

"Joe East like for 'ave me keel you. I get damn seek for trying."

"Then you admit you was tryin' to murder me, eh?"

"Sure. But I'm mak' damn bad job from eet."

Steve laughed softly.

"Why do you come here to tell me this, Rojas?"

"*Quien sabe?* You 'ave chance for keel me, but you don' keel me."

"Rojas, does Joe East think that gold is here?"

"I not know w'at hees theenk from that, but hees wan' this rancho."

"Did he tell Aguilar to execute me, when I was in jail down there?"

"I'm hear Aguilar not wan' do theese theeng—until hees get more money. I not know for sure."

"Rojas, are the L4L cattle down in Mexico?"

Rojas looked at him blankly, and Steve realized that Rojas did not know anything about the cattle. Steve took another tack.

"Tell me what you know about the killin' of Barney Macrae."

"Don' he keel heemself?"

"That's out," grunted Omaha. Rojas eased himself in his saddle.

"Theese strange man ees frand from

Joe East. He ees *mucho malo hombre.*"

"Yea-a-ah? What about him?" asked Steve.

"That ees all I know. Leesten. This ees ver' crazee talk, but I like stay 'ere and—well, I don' like Joe East. He say I am yellow."

"You mean you'd like to stay here, Rojas? That shore *is* crazy talk. How do I know they didn't send you down here? Are you fool enough to think we could trust you? After you've tried twice to murder me?"

"I know." Rojas smiled, showing a flash of white teeth. "I weesh you *fortuna.* Some day I come back. I 'ave been ver' beeg fool. *Adios.*"

As he turned his horse around, something struck him a thudding blow, and from the hill to the south of the ranch-house came the whip-like snap of a rifle shot. Rojas went out of his saddle in a limp heap. The frightened horse whirled. Another bullet tugged at Steve's sleeve. Ducking low, Steve and Omaha raced for the house, while several more hastily fired bullets droned past them, riccocheting from the hard-packed ground and thudding into the stable walls.

Both men dived into the house, grabbed rifles and ran to vantage points, watching the brushy hillside. But the shooter was too clever to expose himself. After thirty minutes of watching, they decided that the man had emptied his rifle and gone away.

They carried Rojas to the shade of the house. He was dead.

"He wasn't lyin', Steve," said Omaha sadly.

"No, he wasn't lyin'. With any kind of a decent break, he'd have been pretty much of a man. He wished us luck, Omaha. Well, I'd like to be lucky enough to find out who shot him. I don't care a hang what Rajos was—that murderer was worse. We'll hitch up the buckboard and take him to town."

CHAPTER XII

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

THE news that Manuel Rojas had been murdered at the L4L ranch flashed quickly around Cinco Robles. Luckily the sheriff was still in town, as was Joe East and Ross Bender. The sheriff took charge of the body, had Doctor Smiley make an examination, and then placed it in a vacant store-room, where the curious came to view the remains.

Steve realized that few believed his story, especially the sheriff.

"Four of us saw how he was killed—us and the women; so there won't be any argument about that part of it."

"Why didn't you leave the body as it lay?" complained the sheriff. "How do you expect me to figure out anythin'—bringin' the body in thisaway?"

"Nobody expects you to figure out anythin', Al."

"Takes brains to figure," added Omaha.

"That's about enough from you," rasped Hickey.

"You can't discount the truth," stated Omaha.

"Jist what was Rojas doin' out at the L4L?" asked Hickey.

"It may sound kinda funny to you, Al; but Rojas got tired of tryin' to be a hired killer."

"Yea-a-ah? I don't quite git what you mean, Steve."

"You'll hold an inquest tomorrow, won't you?"

"I'm sendin' for the coroner right away. It'll all depend on how soon he can git here. Won't be before tomorrow. But what has that got to do with Rojas bein' at the L4L?"

"Well, I believe the inquest will be a mighty good time to tell just why Rojas came out there. It might surprise some of the folks around here. Rojas was killed, because he knew too much."

"Knew too much, eh?" muttered Hickey.

"But they shot too late," said Steve. "Well, we'll see you tomorrow, Al."

After the two cowboys left town the sheriff met Joe East in the Turquoise Saloon.

"What alibi did Kane have for killin' Rojas?" asked East.

"You heard what they said about it, Al; a shot from the brush."

"And you believe that?"

"He claims that all four of 'em saw it, Joe. It's four witnesses to none."

"But why should anybody dry-gulch Rojas?"

"Steve said it was 'cause Rojas knew too much."

"How'd he know Rojas knew too much?"

"It jist might be that Rojas had time to do a little talkin', before he was shot. We'll know all about it at the inquest tomorrow, Joe."

Steve talked things over with Omaha, as they rode home, and both agreed that the L4L ranch was getting to be a dangerous place to live. Steve wanted Mary to move to Cinco Robles and let Mrs. Fernandez visit with some of her friends, until things looked better.

"I'm terribly afraid," admitted Mary, "but I'm not going away."

Steve shook his head.

"War isn't for women."

"Women can fight when the war comes to them," replied Mary.

"Su-u-ure!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernandez. "I'm pretty damn good for fighting myself. I leek my 'usban' t'ree time one wick."

"Three times in a week is a world record," agreed Steve. "No wonder he went to war in Mexico."

"Beeg *idiota*," smiled Mrs. Fernandez. "He didn't need go hont for a tro'ble. He say, 'I go be beeg general. Maybe I be presidente.' I say, 'Maybe you be awful damn dead by yourselves, too?' I am right."

Steve saw to it that the double-barrel shotgun was loaded for Mary. He demonstrated the safety on the gun, which Omaha had already explained to her.

"I hope I never have to shoot it," said Mary.

"I hope you don't, Mary. I don't think there's anythin' for you to worry about. They won't bother you—I hope. But if they do, shoot to kill. Don't take a chance on a prowler. Me and Omaha won't be doin' any prowlin', unless we tell you about it."

Just after dark Steve half-filled the bunk-house lamp, put some thin blankets over the windows, and then he and Omaha moved their bed-rolls down to the hay-mow in the stable. From the wide hay-window they could see the ranch-house and bunk-house. They had agreed to split the night-watch, and Omaha was to stay awake the first half. He sprawled at the hay-window, a rifle beside him, while the moonlight gave him a good view of the other ranch buildings. There were no lights in the ranch-house, but he could see the dull glow through the bunk-house window.

Mocking-birds called sleepily, cows bawled softly around the corrals, and occasionally a coyote, far off in the hills, yipped and howled mournfully. Omaha could hear Steve snoring. Horses moved restlessly in the stalls below him. Omaha sighed and rested his chin on the backs of his hands, as he sprawled on the hay. He yawned and closed his eyes, tired from the strain of watching.

Mary was unable to sleep. For hours, it seemed, she lay wide-eyed, listening. The old ranch-house creaked as it cooled off from the heat of the day. She got up and went to the window, from which she could see the front of the bunk-house. She did not know that the two cowboys were at the stable. She could see the dim light, and wondered if they were going to stay on guard all night.

Sleep was out of the question; so she threw a black mantilla over her shoul-

ders and sat down near the window. The window was in the direct light of the moon, and suddenly she saw a shadow fall across a corner of the sill. Cloth brushed across the rough wall, and the next instant she saw the head and shoulders of a man.

He stood there for several moments, staring straight through the window, turned away and moved softly toward the bunk-house. Mary wanted to scream, but could not utter a sound. She saw him silhouetted against the light from the bunk-house window. He was not over twenty yards away.

Mary's groping hand touched the cold barrels of the big shotgun, and almost before she was aware what she was doing, she had shoved the gun through the open window, fitted the stock against her slim shoulder, pointed and fired.

The big ten-gauge bucked viciously, knocking her backwards, but she was conscious of a blinding flash and a terrific explosion, before she fainted.

Omaha in his sleep had rolled so close to the hay-window that in his dazed excitement he fell over the edge, landing with a thud on hard ground.

Steve, awakened out of a deep sleep, clawed his way to the window, swung by his hands and landed on his feet beside Omaha, who was trying to pump air back into his tortured lungs.

"Did you shoot?" asked Steve.

"No. Did you?"

"Well, what was it? Omaha, was you asleep?"

"I dunno if I—say, do you smell that?"

The breeze was tainted with a peculiar odor.

"Dynamite!" exclaimed Steve. "Smell it? C'mon. Where's yore gun?"

"Oh, hell, it's up in the hay-loft!"

"Never mind it—c'mon."

They went swiftly up to the house. The light was out in the bunk-house now.

"Mary!" called Steve. "Mrs. Fernandez!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" yelled Mrs. Fernandez. "W'at 'appen?"

"Is Mary with you?"

"No! I theenk she is in her room."

"See if she's all right, will you?"

The two cowboys walked over to the front of the bunk-house. Both of the front windows were smashed, the door sagging on broken hinges. Mrs. Fernandez was calling them from Mary's window, and they ran over. She had lighted a lamp, and was helping Mary off the floor. Steve saw the shotgun near the bed, and crawled through the window to pick it up. He opened it, saw the empty shell, and closed it quickly.

Mary was white-faced, trembling.

"It's all right, Mary," he said.

"I shot at a man," she whispered. "He—he looked through the window and then went over by the bunk-house."

Mrs. Fernandez brought her a drink of water, and it revived her.

"You don't know who the man was, Mary?" asked Steve.

"I couldn't see who he was. Wasn't there an explosion?"

He nodded slowly.

"The gun hurt me," she said, rubbing her right shoulder tenderly.

"The explosion was after you fired, wasn't it?"

"Why, it seemed at the same moment."

"It's all right, Mary. You done the right thing. Mrs. Fernandez, you better get some liniment for her shoulder, and give it a good rubbin'. Me and Omaha are goin' to look around. We'll be back."

Steve got a lantern and they went down in front of the bunk-house, where it seemed that the explosion had occurred. Steve picked up a black slouch hat, but was unable to identify it.

"There's somethin'!" exclaimed Omaha. "Out there in them weeds!"

"Not so loud. Keep still, now."

It was Ross Bender. Neither of the

cowboys said anything. Steve motioned for Omaha to help him, and they carried the dead man behind the bunk-house.

"Dynamite shore is messy," whispered Omaha. "But what happened?"

"Don't you see? He was goin' to dynamite the bunk-house. He probably had that dynamite bomb all ready to place against the bunk-house, or throw through a window—and that load of shot smashed into it. He thought we was in there."

"That's a awful dirty thing to do," declared Omaha.

"But we can't let Mary know," whispered Steve. "Why, if she knowed she was responsible for this man's death—"

"But he got his needin's, Steve. He was goin' to murder us."

"I know he was. He got jist what he deserved. But women ain't like men, Omaha—they let things like that worry 'em. We'll go back and tell her that she must have missed her target; and when everythin' is all calmed down, we'll do a little first-aid pall-bearin'."

"That's a good idea. Do you know, if this kinda thing keeps up out here, we ought to hire a undertaker. He could kinda do odd jobs around the place, between killin's."

Mary and Mrs. Fernandez were anxiously awaiting their return. Steve placed the lantern on the floor and sat down.

"I reckon yore shootin' drove 'em away," he told Mary.

"Oh, I'm glad, Steve. It seems like a nightmare."

"No shotgun make that beeg noise," said Mrs. Fernandez.

"I don't know what that was," lied Steve. "The bunk-house windows are busted and the door is kinda antegodlin'. But we are all right; and that's the big thing. Me and Omaha will be up for the rest of the night; so you women can go to sleep and not worry about a thing."

"I'm going to stay in here with Mrs. Fernandez," declared Mary.

"You bet my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernandez. "But leave those shot-gon away. I'm tak' no chance on somebodee walk een a slip."

"Do you walk in yore sleep, Mary?" asked Steve.

She smiled wearily and shook her head. "I don't believe I do."

"Fernandez tak' no chances, you bet my life."

"Well, we'll be on guard; so don't worry," assured Steve.

CHAPTER XIII

"THERE'S A DEAD MAN BEHIND THE SALOON!"

CINCO ROBLES awoke gradually. The hotel cook hammered a metal container against the rim of a garbage barrel, giving a very good imitation of an inexperienced drummer beating time to a one-step. Then he slammed the door behind him.

Two shuffling Chinamen met in front of their cafe across the street, and conversed loudly for fully a minute, before they, too, slammed the front door. A hotel window slid up, and the grumbling inmate made uncomplimentary remarks. The blacksmith, whistling unmusically, came down the street, opened the doors of his shop, went inside and banged a hammer on his anvil, as sort of a notice that he was open for the day.

The touseled head of Al Hickey projected suddenly from between the curtains of the hotel window, and he glared across the street. Al had played poker at the Turquoise until the wee small hours, and he wanted to sleep. There was a short period of comparative quiet, and then the front door of the Turquoise slammed shut. One of the swampers came across the street to the pump, which was located at a corner of the

hotel, convenient for all and sundry.

Evidently in high spirits, he lifted his voice in song.

"My Bo-o-o-on-nee lies over the o-o-o-o-ocean,
My Bonnie-e-e-e-e lies over the se-e-e-e-ea."

Then he grasped the pump-handle, hung the bucket on the spout, and began pumping violently. Ungreased for many weeks, that mechanism shrieked and groaned under his manipulations. The window curtains parted suddenly, and a bare forearm and hand, grasping an empty quart bottle, came into view. The next moment that heavy bottle struck the offender in the calf of the left leg, almost knocking him down.

"Take yore damn bucket and git away from here!" yelled the sheriff.

The swamper was no angel-child himself. He picked up the bottle, stepped off the sidewalk, drew back his arm and flung the bottle with all his strength. It was a dead-center shot—on the wrong window.

"I hope that'll learn you somethin', dang you!" he started. "Throwin' bottles at me. I'll give 'em right back to you, feller."

He filled his bucket and went back across the street. Al Hickey came to the window, spat dryly and indulged in a chuckle. As he leaned out he saw the head and shoulders of Runt Randall in the window of the adjoining room.

"I'll bet that son-of-a-rooster won't make noise under my window early in the mornin' again," declared Hickey.

"Huh?" grunted Runt, leaning out. Both his eyes were fast swelling shut, and were about the same color as shadow in a deep cañon.

"What in the hell's wrong with you, Runt?" gasped the sheriff.

"I dunno. I was settin' there on the bed, pullin' on my boots, when somethin' smacked me down. There was so much noise I couldn't close my eyes—and now I can't open 'em."

"Don't you know what it was?"

"Well, it wasn't anythin' I et, that's a cinch."

"It's shore funny," mused the sheriff.

"Yeah, it is—awful funny. But I can't see to laugh."

"I mean—it's odd."

"I dunno if it's odd or even. Damned if I know how many times I got hit."

The front door of the Turquoise was flung violently open, and the offending swamper came galloping across the street, yelling.

"Wake up the sheriff! Wake up the sheriff! Wake him up, I tell you!"

"What the hell do you want?" roared Hickey. The man stopped short and looked up at the windows.

"Dead man!" he blurted. "Behind the saloon!"

"Lova gosh!" snorted the sheriff. "Who got it this time?"

He ran into the hall, discovered he had forgotten to put on his pants and boots, and rushed back to get them, yelling at Runt to get down there quickly.

"Go to hell!" yelled Runt. "I can't even *find* my pants."

The remainder of Cinco Robles awoke *en masse*, and a dozen people were behind the saloon, when Hickey arrived on the scene. The dead man was Ross Bender. Someone ran to get Doctor Smiley, while the sheriff made a brief examination. He shook his head dumbly.

"He looks like he's been in a explosion," observed one of the men. "His clothes are all torn."

"Wasn't no explosion here last night; not that I heard," said another.

The discussion was general, when Doctor Smiley arrived. His examination was brief.

"This man was blown to death," he declared. "Who is he?"

"His name is Ross Bender," said the sheriff. "He's an investigator for Wells-Fargo."

"He must have found what he was lookin' for," said a swamper.

"The coroner won't be here, before noon," said the sheriff. "We've got plenty of witnesses as to how the body laid here, and all that. Suppose we move him over in that store-room, along with Rojas. Will one of the fellers get a blanket?"

Four of the bystanders put the body on a blanket and they took it across the street, preceded by the sheriff and coroner, who opened the door and walked in. It was a long, narrow room, and the body of Rojas had been placed on some boards, which had been laid across two saw-horses. The boards and saw-horses were still in place, but the body of Rojas was gone.

The sheriff and Doctor Smiley looked blankly at each other, and both looked at the empty saw-horse table.

"Put him on that table, boys," said the sheriff.

"Where's that other dead man?" asked someone.

"Him?" grunted the sheriff. "Oh—he's gone."

"You mean—he went away, Hickey?"

"It—it seems ridiculous," faltered the puzzled doctor.

"Everythin' seems kinda crazy," sighed Hickey, and they walked out.

Runt Randall was standing in the hotel doorway, his eyes swollen shut.

"What on earth happened to you, Randall?" asked the doctor.

"I ain't exactly sure, but I kinda feel that I'm one of them burnt offerin's the Bible tells about."

"Come down to my office and I'll fix up those eyes."

"That dead man is Ross Bender, Runt," said Hickey.

"The hell it is! Well, we're shore gettin' a collection."

"We've only got one. Rojas is gone."

"Gone?"

"He ain't where we left him."

"C'mon, Doc," said Runt. "And while yo're at it, see if you can't do somethin' for my ears, too, will you?"

Omaha brought Mary and Mrs. Fernandez in the buckboard, while Steve came on horseback. They knew nothing about the missing Rojas, until they reached Cinco Robles. The sheriff came to them and told of finding Bender's body behind the Turquoise Saloon, and that Rojas' body was gone.

Steve got the sheriff away from the two women as quickly as possible, for fear he might mention the cause of Bender's death.

"You won't need our testimony now, will you, Al?" observed Steve.

"Nope. I don't see how anybody is goin' to testify. Doc says Bender was killed by an explosion; and we ain't had no explosion. You never heard any, did you, Steve?"

"What sort of an explosion could he have been in, Al?"

"That's what beats me. But there he was, layin' behind the Turquoise."

"Al, there's a lot of mysterious things goin' on," said Steve.

He turned and saw Runt Randall, coming slowly along the sidewalk, his eyes bandaged.

"What in the devil happened to Runt?"

"He was dressin' in his room this mornin', when somethin' hit him between the eyes."

Runt came up to them, barely able to see.

"Doc said he thought I'd live, unless affection sets in," said Runt. "Hyah, Steve."

"Al tells me that somethin' hit you."

"That decision must have required a lot of thought," said Runt. "I expected him to say that I fell out of bed and bumped myself. Steve, you didn't come up here and steal our pet corpse, did you?"

"I've been expectin' that. But if I wanted his remains, I'd have kept 'em in the first place. No, I'll have to admit that I didn't steal the body of Manuel Rojas."

Steve went back and told Mary and Mrs. Fernandez that they would not have to testify. Doctor Smiley was talking with them, and had invited them down to his house to visit Mrs. Smiley, until the inquest was over. Omaha took them down there, and the doctor walked up the street with Steve.

"I suppose you haven't any ideas on how this man Bender was killed?" asked the doctor.

"Hickey says he was dynamited, Doc."

"That's true. But where and how? And why was Rojas' body stolen?"

"Doc," grinned Steve, "what we need around here is a first-class fortune teller."

"It might do a little good. I'm disappointed, Steve. Hickey said you hinted that Rojas told you some things that you might disclose at his inquest. But there won't be any inquest."

"Naturally," replied Steve.

The doctor looked at him curiously. "Meaning that the body was stolen to prevent you from testifying, Steve?"

"Think it over, Doc; that might be the reason."

"Well, bless my heart!"

CHAPTER XIV

DYNAMITE OR DYNAMITES UNKNOWN

THE testimony at the inquest on Ross Bender was not very enlightening. Al Hickey testified that Bender had told him he was a special investigator for Wells Fargo.

"Did you see his credentials?" asked the coroner.

"No—I took his word for it."

William Wells, the stableman, was sworn.

"All I know is this," said William. "He hired a rig from me, and I think he went out to East's ranch. Anyway, Tuck Doble brought it back about five o'clock that same afternoon. That's all I know."

Joe East was called to the stand.

"Bender came out to my ranch in the afternoon," he said. "Hickey had introduced him to me before this, and—"

"Did you know he was a special investigator?"

"I took his word for that. Naturally, they're still tryin' to get a trace of that gold. He talked with me about it, and he said he would probably be here for a week or two. I offered him the use of a horse and saddle, and he accepted; so he sent the rig back to town. I believe Tuck Doble brought it in."

"What time did Bender leave your ranch, Mr. East?"

"I think it was about seven o'clock."

"Who came in with him?"

"He came alone."

"It is a very peculiar case," said the coroner. "The man was apparently killed by a dynamite blast. In fact, the condition of his body would indicate that he—that the dynamite exploded against him. No one seems to have heard an explosion, which would indicate that he had been killed far out from town, and the body brought here."

"You might say he was killed by dynamite, or dynamites, unknown," offered Runt.

"The man didn't kill himself with dynamite, and then bring his own body to town," stated the sheriff testily.

"Prove it," grinned Runt. "Mebbe Rojas got tired of them hard boards, and walked out on us."

"Humor is misplaced at an inquest," reminded the coroner.

"Then why don'tcha git it over with so we can all laugh?" asked Omaha. "About all you can do is to sue the people that made the dynamite."

"Yo're kinda strong for dynamite yourself, ain't you?" asked the bartender from the Turquoise. "I hear you move jails with it."

"I shore do," agreed Omaha heartily. "Ask Steve."

"I don't see where we can bring in any

verdict," said the blacksmith, who had been appointed foreman of the six-man jury. "There's no proof that he was murdered."

"That's true," nodded the coroner. "I suppose we shall have to say he died in an explosion, caused in some unknown manner."

After the inquest Al Hickey told Runt to go back to Encinas City and run that end of the business for a few days, while he stayed in Cinco Robles himself for further investigation. With both of them away from their office, only Johnny Bean, the jailer, was there to handle things. Johnny and Runt had been cowboy bunkies for years.

Omaha went down to Doctor Smiley's house to get Mary and Mrs. Fernandez, while Steve and Runt rode out of town together. Runt's eyes were a little better, but his vision was far from being a hundred per cent. They discussed the mysterious killing of Bender and the theft of Rojas' body, but the deputy had no theories to advance.

He accepted Steve's invitation to stay for supper, and they unsaddled at the ranch to wait for the three people in the buckboard. Steve forgot all about the evidence of an explosion in front of the bunk-house, until Runt called his attention to it.

"Kinda wrecked things, didn't it?" he observed, looking closely.

"Are you askin' what happened?" queried Steve.

"Nope. The longer I live, the more I mind my own business, Steve."

"Set down here and I'll tell you what happened."

"Not unless you want to."

"I want you to get it straight, Runt." Steve explained how he knew Bender was an imposter, and how Bender died.

"The girl don't know it, eh?" said the deputy.

"No. We took the body away and put it in town."

"I reckon that was the thing to do. But what was Bender doin' here, and who was payin' him, Steve?"

"You won't have to make three guesses."

"Mebbe not. But you didn't steal the body of Rojas, Steve."

"We sure didn't. The men who stole that body was afraid to have an inquest. They know that Rojas came here to see me, *and they don't know what he told me.*"

Runt blinked his sore eyes. "Sounds reasonable. Anythin' else you'd like to get off yore chest, Steve?"

"Runt, there ain't a dozen L4L cattle left in this valley."

"You don't mean that!"

"It's true."

"But—well, I don't see how—you ain't jokin', are you?"

"There ain't over a dozen head. Joe East is behind all this, Runt. Oh, I know, he's a big cattleman, and all that. Him and Hickey are as close together as a cow and its hide. That's why I'm not tellin' Hickey. He'd tell East, as sure as shootin'. East and Aguilar are friends—and Aguilar was goin' to execute me for the murder of a man that wasn't dead. East ordered that."

"Can you prove that, Steve?"

"I can't prove anythin'. East brought Bender here; a hired killer. With me out of the way, Mary Macrae would quit. East wants this ranch."

"Why would he want it bad enough to commit murder, Steve?"

"That's the weak spot in my ideas, Runt."

Runt drew a deep breath and began rolling a cigaret.

"I'll give you all the help I can, Steve, I don't think Hickey is crooked—he's dumb. He'd go to hell for a friend."

"Yeah, and he'll get himself a one-way ticket, if he ain't careful."

"I'm not sayin' what I think, Steve. But I do know I'm goin' to be ready for some of Mrs. Fernandez's cookin'."

"They're kinda late," observed Steve. "I reckon I'll build a fire in the kitchen stove."

He carried in some wood and built a fire in the old range, put on the kettle, and went back to Runt. The sun was close to the rim of the western hills.

"I'm kinda worried about the folks," said Steve. "They should be here. Omaha insisted on hitchin' up them sorrels."

They walked to the front of the ranch-house and sat down on the steps.

"Aw, they'll be here," said Runt. "Mebbe Omaha stopped to have one more drink, or mebbe the women wasn't ready to leave. Lots of—"

Runt stopped, when Steve sprang to his feet. Down the crooked road came a running team, the buck-board bouncing crazily.

"Good God, a runaway!" cried Steve. "And only the two women—"

Frozen with horror the two men stood there, unable to do a thing to prevent a catastrophe. Steve prayed the horses would stay on the main road, where a long upgrade might slow them down, but at the big gateway to the ranch, the off horse, running slightly in the lead, broke sharply toward the gate, cutting across the near sorrel.

A cloud of dust shot upward from the skidding wheels, the buck-board flipped over, and the two women were flung aside, just as the whirling vehicle collided with the huge gate-post, and the team broke loose. Both horses were flung heavily, but got to their feet and stood dumbly, their sides heaving.

Steve and Runt ran through the gateway and reached the women. Mrs. Fernandez was sitting up in the middle of the road, staring dumbly about. Mary was crumpled up against a bush, and Steve picked her up in his arms, his face as white as ashes.

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped Mrs. Fernandez. "We go like hell, but stop ver' queek!"

"Are you hurt?" asked Runt, as he helped her to her feet.

"I don' think I am keeled."

"Mary's badly hurt," choked Steve. "What'll we do?"

Mary opened her eyes, blinked painfully and tried to smile.

"Find Omaha," she whispered.

Steve carried her to the house, while Runt helped Mrs. Fernandez, who was more shocked than hurt. Steve placed Mary on a bed and was mopping her face with cold water, when Runt broke in excitedly.

"Listen to this, will yuh? They was stuck-up by some Mexicans, Steve."

"They what?" gasped Steve.

"Su-u-u-ure!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernandez, sinking into a chair. "Five, seex *Mejicanos*, all masked. They stop us. All 'ave gons. Two men grab Omaha and pull heem off the seat. And then w'at you theenk?"

"What?" asked Steve.

"Mary she's grab the wheep, hit the 'orses—and we go like hell. Theese men yell for us to stop. Hah! *Por Dios*, who can stop?"

"They got Omaha," said Steve. "God, it's lucky Mary started that team!"

"You think they would have kidnapped the women?" asked Runt.

"It's me they're after, Runt. They'd do anythin' to get me—even to stealin' a woman. But I've got to get a doctor for Mary."

"She's awake," said Runt. Mary smiled wearily and looked around.

"Are you hurt bad, Mary?" asked Steve.

"I don't feel any pain," she whispered. "Did we tip over?"

"I'll tell a man, you did."

"You go out," ordered Mrs. Fernandez. "I see how much she ees 'urt."

"Ain't you hurt, too?" asked Steve.

"That road ees ver' hard, when you seet down ver' fast," she said seriously. "But I'm no die yet. You go out."

The two men went outside and sat

down on the porch. Steve's face was white and drawn. Runt squinted at him and began rolling a smoke.

"I reckon you think quite a lot of that girl."

"They've got Omaha," said Steve, ignoring the question. He put a hand on Runt's arm and leaned close to him.

"Omaha's my bunkie," he said huskily, "and they've got him. They know he blew up the Agua Frio jail. Don'tcha see, I've got to get him back. He saved me. They know damn well I'll come to get him—and they'll be waitin' for me. Good old Omaha—the dumb son-of-a-gun!"

"You can't go to Agua Frio—and come back alive, Steve."

"I've got to get Omaha. Aguilar got him, because East asked him to get him. Aguilar ain't doin' it for himself, except that East will pay well. Oh, they know I'll come."

"We might take a bunch of fellers—I don't mean, in the name of the law, Steve. You've got to forget law, in a case like this."

"Law!" said Steve explosively. "It never got me anythin'. I'm not askin' any help. They'll prob'ly get me; but they'll remember that I was down there, lookin' for my pardner."

They sat there in silence for a long time. Finally Mrs. Fernandez came to the doorway.

"I don' think she ees 'urt *mucho*," she told them. "She not skeen up ver' bad and no bones ees broke. She be all right."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Steve.

"It took you a long time to answer my question," said Runt.

Steve got to his feet and walked to the edge of the porch, his face set in grim lines, his eyes narrowed from the force of an idea. He turned suddenly.

"Runt, how crazy are you about the law? How much do you value yore job as deputy sheriff?"

"Huh? That's a funny question. I'm supposed to uphold the law, but I'm no damn lawyer, if that's what you mean. I might not know right from wrong. You can't blame a feller for bein' ignorant. And as far as the job is concerned, I didn't marry it, Steve."

Leaning close to Runt, Steve swiftly outlined some intentions that made the big deputy look at him in amazement.

"That sounds exactly like you," said Runt. "But you couldn't do it, Steve. Hell, there's a limit to what you can do!"

"Will you handle yore end of it, if I'll handle mine, Runt?"

The deputy rubbed his sore eyes, tried to shake his head. He wanted to refuse, because the risk was too great. But it suddenly occurred to him that Steve would do it, if their case was reversed. So Runt gambled.

"I'm with you. And when we're linked together out there, breakin' rocks for the state, mebbe we'll realize what a pair of fools we really are, Steve."

"*Oijo por oijo y diente por diente!*"

"That's it," said Runt. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

FIVE men played poker in the Turquoise Saloon that night, and Joe East was one of them. Al Hickey, the sheriff, was another. East drank a lot of whisky. About midnight, after losing two hundred dollars, he said he was going home.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Al."

"Good," replied the sheriff. "I'll be here two, three days, anyway."

East took a final drink and walked out. He was a bit unsteady on his legs, but not drunk. There were several horses at the hitch-rack, and as he fumbled for the rope on his horse, a gun was shoved into his ribs. A voice said softly:

"One word out of you—and you die."

"Yea-a-ah?" said East sarcastically. Perhaps it was the liquor. At any rate, something hit him on the head, and his

consciousness went out in a blaze of glory.

CHAPTER XV

"YOU KEEL MY BROTHER"

THINGS had happened a bit too fast for Omaha to grasp all of them. The holdup had been very sudden. Before he had time to realize that they were being held up, someone had yanked him out of the buckboard. Almost immediately the team had leaped forward, and he saw the buckboard disappear in a cloud of dust. One of the Mexicans yelled for them to stop, and raised his rifle, but Omaha kicked him somewhere in the middle of his body, ruining his aim and also his interest in things in general, and someone cracked Omaha over the head with another rifle.

Omaha awoke, riding crosswise of a horse, roped and blindfolded. His head ached and his stomach felt as though it had been turned over, but he gritted his teeth and tried to remember how he happened to be in this situation. Gradually he recalled. After what seemed hours and hours, the horse stopped, and rough hands unfastened Omaha from the saddle. Someone booted him from behind and he fell into a house, where he was dragged to his feet and the blindfold removed.

It was several moments before Omaha's eyes became accustomed to the light of the room. Here were four Mexicans, all armed. Omaha's hands were still bound, but his feet were loose. Near him stood an undersized Mexican, who seemed to be the leader.

"W'at you theenk now?" he asked Omaha, and in reply, Omaha kicked him below the right knee. The Mexican went limping around the room, spitting profanity and clutching his leg.

"Who you theenk ees prisoner—me or you?" he asked painfully.

"Listen to me, you half-pint Colorado-Maduro. You better take these ropes off me."

"Put him in a chair and tie his feet," ordered the Mexican. His followers did it gingerly, being very careful not to get kicked.

"Well, what's it all about?" asked Omaha.

"You keel my brodder," stated the leader venomously.

"What year was that in?" asked Omaha.

"Theese yir!" snapped the Mexican. "I am Pancho Rojas."

"Manuel's brother, eh?" muttered Omaha. "Yeah, you look alike. Two arms, two legs and a dirty skin."

"You keel Manuel."

"That's a lie."

"So? A lie, eh? You and the one they call Stive keel Manuel."

"Yo're all wrong, Pancho. We didn't kill him. We was *amigo* with Manuel, and somebody shot him from the brush."

"Nobody else shoot Manuel. W'y you lie, eh? Who else shoot heem?"

"One of Joe East's outfit shot him."

"That ees a lie, Manuel work for East."

"East fired him. He told him to git out of the country, before he killed him. Manuel came to tell me what he knew, and they shot him from behind. They was afraid what he might tell us."

"I bili've you lie to me."

"Believe what you like. But I'll bet East hired you to capture me."

Pancho scratched his head thoughtfully and proceeded to roll a cigaret. He was not very bright.

"W'y East want you keeled?"

"So he wants me killed, eh?"

"*Quien sabe?* You blow up jail een Agua Frio."

"I shore did. Tell me, Pancho; was you goin' to steal the girl, too?"

Pancho shrugged his shoulders, trying to appear indifferent.

"I suppose you'll turn me over to Aguilar," said Omaha.

The idea seemed to interest Pancho. "Maybe Aguilar pay good?"

"So that wasn't the idea," said Omaha.

Pancho blew a cloud of smoke through his flaring nostrils.

"Theese Stive come try fin' you, eh?"

"So that's it, eh? Usin' me to force Steve down here. Yo're a fine bunch of dry-gulchers, Pancho."

"I keep you for myself, personally," said Pancho. "Pretty damn queek I keel you for keel Manuel."

"I hope you have rheumatism—all over you. But if you want to kill the man who killed Manuel, you better shoot Joe East."

"I theenk you are the man," replied Pancho.

"Keep on smokin' marahuana, and the Lord knows what you'll think."

Pancho examined the bruise on his leg and went outside, leaving one man on guard. Omaha tried to talk with him, but the man refused to talk.

CHAPTER XVI

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

IT was afternoon, when Steve Kane came to Cinco Robles. He tied his horse in front of the Turquoise Saloon, where the blacksmith accosted him with:

"You ain't see Joe East, have you, Steve?"

"What happened to him?"

"Nobody knows. They're organizin' a searchin' party now."

"Imagine that!" snorted Steve, and walked to the saloon. At the bar were at least a dozen men. Among them were Al Hickey, Tuck Doble and two other East men, Harry Allen and Bill Prince.

"Here's Steve now," said Hickey.

Steve stopped between the door and the bar and looked the men over calmly.

"Yeah, here he is," admitted Steve. "It might interest you to know that late yesterday afternoon a bunch of Mexicans stopped our buckboard this side of the ranch and tried to kidnap Miss Macrae, Mrs. Fernandez and Omaha Oglesby. They got Omaha, but the team ran away and saved the women."

"Heavenly love!" snorted Elmer, the bartender.

"They got Omaha, eh?" said the sheriff. "Hell's to pay around here, Steve. Joe East left here late last night, headin' for home, and he ain't been seen since."

"Oh, yes, he has," replied Steve calmly. "I know where he is."

"You know where he is?"

"I told you—" began Tuck Doble angrily.

"You might as well take it kinda easy," advised Steve.

"Where is Joe East?" demanded the sheriff.

"There's just one way for you to find out."

"How's that?"

"Bring me Omaha Oglesby—unharmed."

"Why, you poor fool, you!" exploded Tuck.

"Stop it!" roared the sheriff. "Tuck, keep yore face shut; and let me handle this. Steve, you know where Joe East is, you say?"

"You don't hear very good, do you, Al? I've said it twice."

"You mean—you've got him prisoner?"

"Exactly."

"But damn it, that's kidnappin'! I can throw you in jail for it."

"Go ahead. With me in jail, what'll Joe East do? You'd never find him."

"Well," said the sheriff softly, "I'll be damned!"

"I know it," nodded Steve. "And to the rest of you Quarter-Circle JHE'S, I want to say this: Joe East is my ace-in-the-hole. Without me, he's a cooked goose. So, jist in case any of you dry-gulchers get an itch in yore trigger finger—the surest way to murder Joe East is to shoot me first.

"And try to remember that my price for Joe East is the return of Omaha Oglesby—unharmed. And if Omaha is killed, I'll kill Joe East. Think it over, gents. And for yore own information, Ross Bender, as he called himself, was a gunman, hired by Joe East. He came out to dynamite the L4L bunk-house, and the dynamite went off in his hand. And Joe East had Rojas' body stolen to prevent me from tellin' at the inquest what Rojas told me. Smoke that over in yore pipes. *Adios.*"

Steve turned and walked out, leaving the crowd to gawp at each other.

"Are we goin' to let him git away with that?" roared Doble.

"Do you want Joe East to die?" asked the sheriff. "Have sense."

"Accusin' us and Joe East of them things," wailed Doble. "I'm not goin' to stand for it, I tell you! I'll choke the truth out of him."

"Listen, Tuck," said the sheriff calmly. "When you talk of chokin' Steve Kane, yo're speakin' about a mighty big chore. He can draw and shoot faster than any man on yore outfit. He can hit dimes, where you'd miss a Stetson hat. Don't be a fool. Blow all you want to, but don't hop onto Steve, 'cause he'll kill you."

"You ain't backin' that—that kidnapper, are you, Al?"

"Joe East is a friend of mine, Tuck; and I believe what Steve Kane told us."

"But what's to be done? What are you goin' to do?"

"Me?" The sheriff leaned against the bar, hooked one heel over the rail and cocked his sombrero over one eye.

"I think I'll jist kinda set on the outside and let somebody else play out this hand."

"Yo're a hell of a sheriff!"

"Uh-huh. And what are you goin' to do, Tuck? You talk big—but what can you do?"

Tuck thought it over and grinned sourly.

"It kinda looks like Steve Kane held all aces, don't it?" asked the sheriff. "And," his lips tightened a little, "I'd hate to be in Joe East's boots, if Omaha don't come back."

"We ain't got him, damn it!" wailed Tuck. "You act like we was guilty of stealin' the dumb, damn fool."

"I don't know that I'm doin' any *actin'*, Tuck. Like I jist said, it ain't up to me. Steve admits that he's got Joe East tied up somewhere. I could arrest Steve for that—and let Joe starve to death. You see what I mean? And Joe's goose is cooked, if any misguided fool should happen to kill Steve. 'Course, if nobody cares what happens to Joe—that's a different matter."

"I reckon we'll go back to the ranch, boys," said Tuck. "No use standin' around here, arguin'."

As the three men rode back to the ranch, Tuck Doble said;

"We've got to watch Steve Kane. When he goes to Joe East, we'll trail him."

"A good idea," agreed Bill Prince. "But suppose he's keepin' Joe in the ranch-house."

"By God, we'll raid the ranch-house!"

"Some of us would git killed," said Prince. "Mebbe it would be Steve Kane. And if Joe wasn't in the house—blooey!"

"Yeah, that idea ain't so awful good, Bill."

"It's like playin' checkers and finding that any move you make loses the game for you," said Harry Allen.

"You said a heap that time," agreed Tuck. "Tonight I'm goin' down to see Aguilar."

CHAPTER XVII

"IT EES TOO LATE!"

IT WAS just after dark when Steve brought Mary and Mrs. Fernandez to Doctor Smiley's home. Mary was stiff and lame, but not in need of medical care.

"I might be busy tonight," Steve told the doctor," and I don't want 'em alone at the ranch."

"They are both mighty welcome here," said Mrs. Smiley. The doctor had heard what Steve had done to force the return of Omaha, but he did not ask Steve anything about his future plans.

Steve put the buggy team in the livery-stable, mounted the horse he had led from the ranch, and rode back toward the ranch. But that was a ruse. A short distance out of town, he turned south and headed toward Agua Frio, the place he had promised himself never to enter again. But Steve was not too sure that the Quarter-Circle JHE would be able to deliver Omaha. It was merely a guess.

Steve knew that Aguilar, beside being chief of police, was owner of the Fortuna Gambling House, and very likely the power behind the petty politics of Agua Frio. He had a private office in the Fortuna, where he spent much of his time. Steve had been in this office.

Steve had guessed rightly that Tuck Doble would go to Agua Frio. Whether or not Tuck had any hand in the kidnapping, he would do everything possible to save Joe East. Steve left his horse in the deep shadow of an old adobe. Agua Frio was not a big town, and it did not require much time for Steve to examine the horses at several hitch-racks, and he saw none from north of the border.

The unlighted street gave Steve a chance to move about, with little chance of being discovered. Through the windows of the Fortuna he saw Aguilar. There were several white men in the place, but none of East's outfit. He saw Aguilar go to a stairway, which led to a balcony, and realized that he was going to his office. He was carrying a bottle in one hand.

The Fortuna was a bit of a problem. From an old wall, at the rear, Steve managed to crawl up over the old tile roof, which was rather flat, where he worked his way along to a spot above the wooden balcony outside Aguilar's room. This did not face the main street. As Steve sprawled at the edge, wondering how he could get down on the balcony without alarming Aguilar, the door opened and the big Mexican came out. He was so close that Steve could have reached down and touched his head. He tossed a broken glass over the balcony, and went back inside, closing the door.

Swiftly Steve removed his boots, hooked the tops over his belt at each side, and slid over the edge. The old tiles held, and when Steve slid the full length of his arms, and dropped, he made no sound. Crouching on the balcony, he drew on his boots. There was someone in the room, talking with Aguilar. Steve held an ear close to the edge of a window. The visitor was Tuck Doble, and he was explaining about Joe East in harsh terms and tones.

"Por Dios!" exclaimed Aguilar. "This ees bad feex. By this time this Oglesby ees dead."

Steve froze against the window, his heart thudding.

"Dead?" queried Tuck. "What do you mean, Aguilar?"

"I mean that the man who capture heem ees Pancho Rojas, brodder of Manuel. He wan' revenge; so I theenk he ees good man for the job."

"Aw, hell!" wailed Tuck. "You've done it now! But it might not be too late. Where is he? Where'd they take him?"

"To the Rancho Verdugo."

"Well, damn it, write me out an order. I want Oglesby."

"I go weeth you. That ees better than written order. But I am afraid it ees too late."

Steve was not thinking about being discovered now. He went over the balcony rail, swung by his hands and dropped. The shock sent him to his knees, but he got up quickly and raced for his horse.

"If I'm too late," he swore, as he

mounted, "Saint Peter is goin' to hold night-court on a chief of police and a horse-thief."

CHAPTER XVIII

"HE KEEL YOU FOR SURE!"

THE Rancho Verdugo was less than a mile south of the Border; a dilapidated old group of adobe buildings, tumbledown corrals, nearly hidden in cactus and mesquite. In what had been the main room of the ranch-house two Mexicans sat at a crude table, lighted with two candles. Between them was a six-inch square of paper, in the center of which was a small, crudely-drawn circle; and in the circle were two jumping-beans. Silver pesos gleamed in the candlelight—the stakes of the queer game.

A bean moved convulsively, skittered a fraction of an inch. The backer of that particular bean hissed sharply. It tilted, skittered again, and was back where it started from. The other player laughed softly.

"*Frio,*" murmured one of them, meaning that lack of heat caused the beans to lie quietly. That is, the worm inside the so-called bean, which is not a bean, refused to become active. The beans were marked, and the bean which first rolled off the paper would win the pot.

Near them, still bound to a chair, but not gagged, was Omaha Oglesby.

"Settin' there for three hours, waitin' for a bean to win three dollars Mex," said Omaha. "Like betting on a turtle in a marathon."

"W'at you keek about?" asked one of the players. "Pretty queek Pancho come back and then he keel you for sure."

"Bull!"

"Not bull. You keel hees brodder."

Omaha laughed shortly. "He brought me down here for revenge, eh? He loved his brother so much. Bull! He's gone to try and sell my hide to Joe East."

"How you know theese theengs?"

"I'm a mind-reader. I read minds. Do you know what I mean?"

"Huh?" When the Mexican turned to look at Omaha, his opponent deftly slid his bean to the very edge.

Sensing that something was wrong, the other turned quickly. Too dumb to protest against what he believed to be an infraction of the rules, he stared at the bean. It tottered on the edge, turned around, and went right straight back to the center, where it collided gently with the other bean.

The cheater swore softly and called down eternal damnation upon such an ignorant worm. Omaha chuckled.

"I wouldn't trust that jasper, even at a game of jumpin' beans," he said. "He's cheatin' you. He's gave you an old crow-bait of a bean, and he's got a buckin' bean right off the open range for himself. Fact is, I wouldn't trust neither of you, the way you tied me up."

A sound at the doorway caused them all to turn quickly. Steve, gun in hand, was inside the room. His face was sweat-streaked, his narrowed eyes watching the two Mexicans.

"Are you all right, Omaha?" he asked, without turning his head.

"Finer 'n frawg-hair, and glad to see you."

"Git up, you two," ordered Steve. "One of you cut him loose—and then drop the knife, or I'll drop you."

"*Si, si!*" exclaimed one of them, and proceeded to carry out orders.

Omaha stretched himself, flexed his wrists, yawned and walked over to the table, where he picked up an old Mauser rifle.

"We'll be goin', Omaha," said Steve. "There'll be a bunch here from Agua Frio pretty soon—and the meetin' might not be pleasant."

"All right. Wait a minute."

He took the other rifle, smashed it over the table and threw it aside.

"These boy's been pretty decent to me," he told Steve. "I'll keep the other

rifle, which kinda takes out their fangs. I heard 'em remark about their horses bein' over in the stable; so I'll have transportation. Let's be goin'."

Steve turned to the two Mexicans.

"Aguilar is comin'," he told them. "I heard him say he'd kill you both, if the prisoner was gone. Understand?"

"*Si.* We *vamoso pronto. Gracias.*"

"Which will leave 'em guessin'," smiled Steve. "C'mon, Omaha."

"The women? What happened to 'em?"

"The buckboard turned a hoolihan, but they're all right."

"Great! I've been worried about 'em, Steve. Rojas' brother got me. He was goin' to kill me for revenge, but I talked him into tryin' to sell me to Joe East.

"The hell you did!"

"Sure. I ought to be a peddler. I told him Joe East would kill me, anyway; so he might as well make a good profit out of the job."

"What did they say about the women? Was they tryin' to kidnap them, too?"

"I don't know. As near as I can figure out, they wanted to land some of our outfit; so as to force you to come down across the line. Yo're the one they want. Anyway, they told this Pancho Rojas that me and you murdered his brother, and he led the procession, figurin' on a little private throat-cuttin'."

They took a horse and saddle from the stable, and in a few minutes they were galloping for the Border. Omaha did not think to ask Steve how he knew where to come.

"Wasn't you scared?" asked Steve.

"Oh, yeah, I s'pose I was. But I wasn't worryin' much, as long as I only had Mexicans to deal with. It takes them a long time to figure out how to kill you; and I believe I almost had Pancho convinced that it was Joe East's gang that killed Manuel."

The elevation was much higher at the Border, and they stopped to look back, as they rolled smokes, and let their horses take a breather.

"Oh, yeah!" exclaimed Omaha. "I forgot to tell you. Pancho didn't know I understand Mexican. Gee, it shore was funny."

"What was funny?"

"I don't know how they're doin' it, but they're alterin' the L4L brand to a Quarter Circle JHE at the Rancho Verdugo. I reckon they've got all the L4L cattle down there. I heard Pancho wonderin' how he can double-cross Joe East and steal the whole works."

"And you forgot it!"

"Well, I had other things on my mind, Steve."

"It's all right. I'm glad to know where them cows went."

"You ain't surprised?"

"Not exactly. I knew several days ago that they was alterin' our brand. They must have let a cow and calf drift away. The mark on the calf was all right, but the alterin' on the cow showed plain. They prob'ly intended leavin' 'em all down there, until the brand had all healed, and then sift 'em back into the valley."

"I never can tell you anythin'," sighed Omaha. "I make a discovery, and you've knowed it for years. If I told you where all that gold is cached, you'd prob'ly say, 'Hell, I've knowed that for weeks.' "

"Go ahead and tell me," said Steve. "I'll tell you if yo're right."

"Well—no, I can't quite do it, Steve."

Steve crushed out the light of his cigaret and picked up his reins.

"By golly!" he exclaimed softly. "Mebbe that's right!"

"I know damn well it's right," laughed Omaha, and they rode on.

CHAPTER XIX

AGUILAR CROSSES THE BORDER

AGUILAR believed in force of numbers. When they rode out of Agua Frio, eight of Aguilar's private rurales rode

with them. Aguilar was not a daredevil; he believed in protection. Tuck Doble was anxious to find Omaha Oglesby, and he was savage toward Aguilar for the delay in starting; but they rode fast enough.

Near the rancho Aguilar sent one man ahead to investigate and inform the guards of his approach. The man's report was discouraging; but they investigated for themselves. The cut ropes and smashed gun attested to the fact that a rescue had been effected. The guards had made good their statement to Steve, that they would *vamoso pronto*, because neither was in evidence, and the extra horse was gone.

Aguilar suggested that Steve Kane had rescued Omaha.

"He wouldn't know where to look," argued Tuck Doble. "Anyway, Steve knowed he had us where the hair is short; and he wouldn't take a chance in comin' down here."

"I theenk he was here," declared Aguilar. Tuck shrugged his shoulders and looked moodily at the candles.

"I'm damn tired of the whole thing," he said. "I've got a good notion to go right to the L4L and shoot it out with Kane. I'll bet a cowhide against a herd of cows—I mean, I'll bet a herd of cows against a cowhide that Steve Kane is holdin' Joe East right there in the L4L ranch-house."

"*Buena!*" grunted Aguilar. "And eef we can catch theese Kane, we weel make heem talk."

"That's an idea, Aguilar. We never thought of *makin'* him talk. Damned if I don't believe you've hit the right thing."

"But catch heem first."

"How much sportin' blood have you got? How about all ten of us goin' to the L4L and takin' Steve Kane? There's a damn good-lookin' girl there, too—and I don't want her."

"No!" snapped Aguilar. "Weemen are bad luck. I never touch weemen. Eef I steal a weemen, hell begins to start raising. Pretty queek, lots of tro-ble along Border. Pretty queek Federal *soldados* come—what the hell? I fight weeth man—nobody care."

"I don't care whether you take her, or not; I merely said she was there. What about the rest of the deal? We can ride in there, grab Steve Kane, and be back at Rancho Verdugo long before daylight. And it's a cinch they won't be lookin' for us. Kane thinks he's as safe as a church."

"Sure," agreed Aguilar. "I mak' Joe East pay damn well."

"He ain't never failed to pay yet, has he?"

"Damn good rizzon. He need me."

They rode away toward the Border, with Tuck Doble acting as pilot for the cavalcade.

CHAPTER XX

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

THAT afternoon Al Hickey, the sheriff, decided to go to Ancinas City and talk matters over with the prosecuting attorney. Certain accusations had been made and certain things had been done, on which the sheriff wanted legal advice. He had intended stopping at the L4L, but decided against it.

Steve and Omaha rode boldly in at the ranch that night and put their horses in the stable. Without any explanation Steve got a short ladder and a hammer from the stable and took them up to the old pump near the kitchen door.

With only the pale moonlight for illumination he pried up one of the wide floor-boards of the well and slid the ladder down in against the curbing. The well had only been dug about twelve feet, when they struck water, and then a point had been driven deep, to assure plenty of water. There was about three feet of water in the well.

"Rescuin' prisoners kinda makes you crazy, don't it?" asked Omaha. "Or are you so thirsty you can't wait to use the pump?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," replied Steve, as he slid over the aperture and groped for the ladder.

He disappeared, followed in a few moments by the splash, as he climbed down into the water.

"How about a little soap?" asked Omaha. "And don't forget you've got skin behind yore ears, Steve."

There was more splashing, and Steve's voice booming hollowly; "Come down here, Omaha. Don't fall down—climb down."

"I'm crazy, too, I guess," complained Omaha, as he wriggled over the edge and wiggled his legs, trying to locate the ladder.

"If I slip, we're both sunk," he declared breathlessly. He got his big feet on the ladder, started to go down, but stopped, with only his head over the edge. He saw the shadow of a man against the front of the stable. Crouching low, he whispered the information down to Steve.

"Take it easy and slide that board back in place," whispered Steve. Omaha reached out cautiously and drew the board over the top of his head, leaving room for him to see a little and to hear what might go on.

Judging from the sound of footsteps there were two men. They came up near the well and carried on a low-tone conversation.

"I tell you, he ain't here. I seen both women at Smiley's house. Steve's out huntin' for Omaha—and he'll never find him."

The other man was a bit dubious.

"I'd like to be damn sure. House all dark thataway—might be a trap."

"Na-a-aw! Trap! I'll go alone. We can search that place in five minutes. If Joe ain't there, we'll get out."

"Well—but we've got to have a light."

"We'll light a lamp. I tell you, it won't take five minutes."

"Looks like a sucker trick to me. But I'll take a chance. Try that back door."

The back door was unlocked. Rarely does a ranch-house have locks on the doors. The two men went inside and closed the door. Omaha whispered the information down to Steve.

"Who are they?" asked Steve.

"I dunno. They talked awful soft-like. What'll we do?"

"Let 'em search, I reckon. No use of us startin' a battle."

Omaha saw a shaft of light from a window, where the two men had lighted a lamp. Steve crawled up out of the water and crouched on the ladder below Omaha, who sagged down and whispered huskily to Steve:

"Here's a whole gang, Steve! What's comin' off, I wonder?"

It was Aguilar, Tuck Doble and their army, ten men in all. They guarded both front and rear doors, while Tuck and Aguilar debated the best method of assault. The first two men came back to the kitchen, blew out the lamp, and walked out. There was a flurry of bodies, the thud of blows.

"That's the way to do it!" exclaimed Tuck Doble. "Nice work, boys! Now we can search the place. Wait'll I light the lamp."

He stepped into the kitchen, lighted the lamp and stepped out with it to examine the two men, who were being well roped by the Mexicans.

"Hell and high-water!" he rasped. "This ain't—why, it's Bill Prince and Harry Allen! Take off them ropes."

Aguilar swore viciously. All that trouble, and they got the wrong men. Both men had been knocked out cold—were still unconscious.

"Let 'em git out of this the best they can," advised Tuck. "I'm pullin' out. Damn it, I'm tired of bein' laughed at for makin' mistakes. Joe East ain't in

that house, or they'd have found him. Let's go."

"That suits me fine," agreed Aguilar. "*Vamos!*" he snapped at his men, who lived only to obey orders.

Swiftly they left the L4L, while Omaha and Steve climbed out of the well, roped the two men and took them into the house. Steve nailed the board into place on the well top, after which they threw some water into the faces of the captives.

Bill Prince was first to recover. He blinked painfully, considered his condition and then studied the grave faces of his captors.

"Next time I'll believe what I hear," he said huskily. "Any old time two men can fight so fast that they look like six or seven men, I'm quittin'."

"Yo're quittin' all right," agreed Steve. "This is right where you quit, Bill. We've got the deadwood on the whole Quarter-Circle JHE."

"Bull!" said Bill inelegantly.

"Sayeth thou?" queried Omaha.

"That's what I said. You can't hang anythin' on us for comin' here to try and find Joe East. That's no crime."

"Don't forget that we just came from the Rancho Verdugo," said Steve. Bill's eyes opened a little wider.

"Well, what's that got to do with us?" he wanted to know.

"They send men to the penitentiary for alterin' brands, Bill."

"Not in Mexico, they don't. And that's in Mexico. Play that over on yore piano, feller."

"They're alterin' L4L's to Quarter-Circle JHE's."

"Are they? That's a playful Mexican custom, I s'pose."

Steve smiled grimly. Joe East had protected his men very well, and they knew it.

"You better cut us loose," said Prince. "Yo're whipped, and you know it."

"Yea-a-ah?" drawled Steve. "I think I'll ride to Cinco Robles and have a little heart-to-heart talk with the sheriff about you two fellers."

"Yo're kinda late. He left for Encinas City this afternoon."

"He did, eh?" Steve got to his feet and walked the length of the room, thinking swiftly. He had been blocked, it seemed. There was no chance to prove to the law that Joe East was having those cows rebranded in Mexico. He swore at himself for not having kept that old cow and the calf. It would not have required the opinion of an expert to prove that the Quarter Circle JHE had been made over the L4L. But it might require weeks of search to find that one old cow.

Bill Prince smiled to himself, as he watched Steve. Harry Allen recovered, grunted painfully and seemed resigned for the moment, when Bill motioned for him to be silent. Steve looked them over thoughtfully, turned to Omaha and asked:

"Them two or three old chickens roost in the stable, don't they?"

Omaha gawped at Steve, but shook his head.

"Mostly allus in the buggy shed. But what on earth has a old chicken—"

"We're not hungry, if that's what you mean," informed Bill.

"You'll be lucky if you don't eat worse than crow," replied Steve, as he stepped to the door. "Keep an eye on 'em, Omaha; I'll be back in a few minutes."

CHAPTER XXI

THE SHERIFF FINDS A PRISONER

IT WAS nearly nine o'clock when Al Hickey arrived at Encinas City. There was a light in his office; so he tied his tired horse to the little hitch-rack and walked in. There was no one in the office, but the door to the jail corridor was open, and as the sheriff crossed toward his desk, Johnny Bean, the short,

fat jailer, came out carrying a trayful of dirty dishes. At sight of the sheriff, he nearly dropped the tray.

"Hyah, Al," he gulped. "We wasn't expectin' you so soon."

"No-o-o-o?" said Hickey, eyeing the tray. He lifted his brows and looked at his jailer.

"Got a prisoner, Johnny?"

"Well, you see, Al, we—uh—it's like this. Oh, here's Runt now."

Runt Randall came through the doorway, saw the sheriff and saw the tray in Johnny's hands. He cuffed his hat over one eye and looked at Hickey.

"Well!" he grunted. "Yo're here, eh?"

"Anythin' wrong about that, Runt?"

"Not a thing—only you said you'd be there a few days."

"Uh-hu-u-u-u-uh. Now, about that tray. You was sayin' somethin', Johnny."

Johnny looked at Runt, and Johnny said hoarsely;

"We are lost, the captain shouted, as he staggered down the stairs."

"And not a so-o-o-oul was saved," quavered Runt.

"What's this all about? Who have you got in that jail?"

"Oh! In the jail? You was speakin' of the prisoner, Al? Well," Runt shrugged his big shoulders, "we might as well rend the veil asunder, Johnny. The prisoner is Joe East, Al."

"Joe East? You mean—he's in this jail?"

"Go ahead and contradict me," said Runt sadly. "I'm open to an argument."

"Git out of the way!" snapped the sheriff, and flung Johnny violently aside, knocking the tray out of his hands. Down the corridor he went, half-running.

"I'm jist scared to death that me and you are fired," said Johnny, "so I'm takin' time by the fetlock and walkin' right out."

"Gimme a hand-holt," said Runt," and I'll go with you. Anyway, I'd rather face 'em in the dark; I blush so danged easy."

They went outside, turned the corner and stopped in a dark alley. The sheriff and Joe East were in the office, both of them trying to talk at the same time. East was furious. Apparently he blamed the sheriff; and the sheriff was proving an alibi. They came to the doorway, not bothering to lower their voices.

"I'll get Steve Kane for this," swore East. "I'll get that deputy, too. I'm goin' back there and make Painted Valley so hot that Kane will wish—"

"I'll go with you, Joe. You can easy prove kidnappin'. I'll have him in jail here, before tomorrow night."

"If he lives, you will. Go get me a horse. Hurry up, will you? I'm on the war-path. If I see yore deputy, before you get back, you may not have to fire him."

Al Hickey hurried down to the livery-stable, while Runt went back to their own stable, where he saddled his horse.

"You ain't goin' with 'em, are you, Runt?" asked Johnny.

"Not, unless they've got horses that can outrun mine," laughed Runt, as he yanked the latigo tightly.

"Are you still for Steve Kane, Runt?"

"Well," replied Runt, swinging into his saddle, "I've got to be for somebody; and after what Joe East said, I ain't for him. *Adios*, ex-jailer."

CHAPTER XXII

"A LOT CAN HAPPEN IN A DAY"

IT was after midnight when Steve and Omaha left the ranch. The prisoners were roped together in the house, swearing vengeance, but unable to move hand or foot. The two cowboys went to Doctor Smiley's place and found them all grouped in the living-room, anxiously waiting for news of Omaha. Mary was overjoyed to know that Omaha was safe, but a little puzzled at the grim demeanor

of Steve. The smile was gone now, and he looked years older. Apparently the old doctor noticed it, too.

"Now that Omaha is back—will you release Joe East?" he asked.

"Unless I misjudge Al Hickey, Joe East is loose," replied Steve. "Hickey went back to Encinas City this afternoon—and Joe East was in jail there. Runt Randall and Johnny Bean took a chance and played the game with me. It'll cost them their jobs; and I lose my ace-in-the-hole, Doc."

"They're jist a gang of rustlers," added Omaha. "They drove all the L4L cattle down there into Mexico, and are takin' their own sweet time in alterin' the brands to the Quarter-Circle JHE."

"And we can't do a thing," admitted Steve.

"Meaning," said the doctor, "that Joe East wins?"

Steve looked at Mary, who was watching and listening earnestly.

"He ain't won yet, Doc. I think he'll be back to this town pretty soon; and he'll be in war-paint. There's a bunch at the Turquoise tonight."

"Well, that isn't unusual for Saturday night, Steve."

"That's right—I forgot the day of the week. I—I kinda wish you'd be there, in case anythin' starts. I might want you to back me up in a few things, Doc."

"In what things, Steve?"

"We'd have to wait and see."

"I'd be glad to do it," nodded the doctor. Mary came to Steve and took hold of his arm.

"It isn't worth the trouble and danger, Steve. I have made up my mind to go away tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Mary?"

She nodded.

"Well," he said softly, "tomorrow is Monday. This is Sunday now. A lot of things can happen between now and Monday, Mary. C'mon, Omaha." He walked out, with the big cowboy close behind him.

Mary turned quickly to Doctor Smiley, who was looking at the closed door.

"Where are they going, Doctor? What is it Steve intends to do?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I have never seen the boy in that state of mind. I'm afraid of what may happen tonight, if Joe East comes back."

"Oh, I don't want anything to happen to Steve," said Mary. "He is doing all this for me."

"That goes back for a million years, Mary. Men have always fought over women, or for women, ever since the world began. But I'll get my hat and go up to the Turquoise."

RUNT RANDALL did not spare his horse in his long ride from Encinas City, and the animal was leg-weary, when the big deputy sheriff dismounted at the L4L ranch-house. The house was in darkness. After knocking several times, he flung open the door. Lighting a match he saw the two prisoners, blinking at him. He lighted the lamp and looked them over, a grim smile on his lips.

"Take these damn ropes off, Runt," said Bill Prince.

"Who tied you up—Steve?"

"Yeah."

"Then stay tied. Where'd he go?"

"So yo're throwin' in with him, are you?"

"You didn't think I was settin' in with Joe East, did you?"

"You better, if you want to live around this country."

"You don't even know where he is," laughed Runt.

"Oh, he'll show up; don't you worry about that."

"Yeah? Yo're a fine pair of horse-thieves. But I'm in a hurry right now; so I hope you rest well. Git used to it, 'cause our jails ain't got no feather-beds."

"I'll see you in hell!"

"You may be down there, lookin' for me; but I won't be there." Runt walked out and slammed the door. He felt that Joe East and Al Hickey were not far behind him; and he wanted to find Steve Kane before they did.

CHAPTER XXIII

"THEY'RE COMING TONIGHT!"

TUCK DOBLE was in town. He found Don Monahan, Art Black and Zeb Hill, all from the Quarter-Circle JHE, in the Turquoise.

"Where's Harry Allen and Bill Prince?" he asked innocently.

"I don't know where they went," replied Zeb Hill. "Bill said they was doin' a little private investigatin'."

Tuck knew where they were. That is, he knew where they were when he and Aguilar's outfit rode away and left them, but he didn't want any of the men to know about his mistake.

"What did you do about Omaha Oglesby?" asked Don Monahan.

"Oh, he's all right," assured Tuck. "I reckon we'll be able to make the trade all right. Have you seen anythin' of Kane tonight?"

"He ain't been around, Tuck. Have a drink?"

"I guess I need one."

Steve and Omaha, lurking outside the Turquoise Saloon, saw Runt dismount at the hitch-rack, and went to join him. He was overjoyed to see Omaha, and quickly told Steve what had happened when Hickey found East in jail.

"They're comin' tonight," he said. "I pulled out ahead of 'em, and I saw yore two prisoners at the ranch-house."

"What did they have to say about it?" asked Omaha chuckling.

"Oh, they wanted me to turn 'em loose. But I wished 'em many happy returns of the day, and pulled out. What's to be done, Steve? East swears he'll run you out of the country. Of course, me and Johnny are half out of jobs, but that don't make any difference."

"I'm sorry about that part of it," said Steve. "It was a crazy idea of mine. The East outfit stole all the L4L cattle and took 'em to the Rancho Verdugo, where they're alterin' the brands to the Quarter-Circle JHE. Bein' in Mexico, I can't touch 'em—not lawfully. Runt, they've kinda got me whip-sawed; but not whipped."

"But what's to be done, Steve? Hell, I'm backin' any play you want to make. Al is with Joe East. He thinks Joe is right, and yo're wrong. Mebbe you are, but I've got to string with you."

"That's friendship," said Steve softly, "and I appreciate it. I've been tryin' to clear Barney Macrae's name and save the L4L for Mary. Like a boil, this deal has come to a head, and I don't know whether I'm man enough to lance it. Mebbe I ain't. But I'll either be a big man in Painted Valley, or be hellin' out of here on a fast horse, headin' for parts unknown."

"Oh-oh!" grunted Runt. "Here comes Joe East and Al Hickey."

The three men dodged away from the hitch-rack and stepped into the deeper shadows, as the two riders came up on leg-weary horses. They dismounted heavily, tied their horses and went straight to the Turquoise Saloon.

The drinking cowboys roared a welcome to Joe East, and it seemed as though each one of them tried to question him at the same time. But Joe East was not answering questions. His eyes swept the room, noted the number of his own boys. Doctor Smiley was standing at one end of the bar, and the sheriff said;

"Up kinda late, ain't you, Doc?"

"Saturday night," reminded the doctor. "I usually stay up later on Saturday nights."

"Sure," nodded Hickey. As he turned

around he saw Runt Randall standing near him.

"How the hell did you git here?"

"They ain't runnin' trains in here," said Runt, "so I must have rode a horse."

"What's the idea, anyway?"

"Bein' that I ain't a deputy any more, Al, I don't reckon I'll have to answer that question."

"Suit yourself. And yo're right about not bein' a deputy."

Al Hickey turned his back on Runt. East was talking earnestly with Tuck Doble, and neither of them saw Omaha Oglesby come in the rear door. Only Runt Randall saw him, because he was expecting him.

East turned from Tuck Doble and lifted his voice.

"Well, boys, I'm back and I'm goin' to stay back. Step up to the bar and have a drink on me. Things have been said and done around here—lies and all that—but that's over. But I'm goin' to show some people—"

"You mean, yo're goin' to try and fool some people."

Steve Kane stood between the bar and the doorway, looking at Joe East, who had turned quickly. The room was silent. A boot creaked, a hand slapped against Joe East's holster, and Omaha stepped back, holding Joe East's gun in his hand.

"You damn—" East stepped away from the bar.

"Just to save you from bein' a fool all yore life," said Omaha.

"And just to say to you boys from the Quarter-Circle JHE," added Runt, "if anythin' starts, there'll be food for the buzzards tomorrow in Painted Valley."

Steve and Runt were in front of them, Omaha behind them.

"You crazy fools!" exclaimed Hickey. "What are you tryin' to do?"

"East," said Steve, "you're done. You robbed that train and you loaded that gold on that pinto horse, but the pinto broke away in the dark, and brought the gold back to the L4L."

"Yo're crazy!"

"You knew that Barney Macrae found the gold and hid it. You tried to make him tell where it was, and you shot him when he wouldn't."

"Don't make me laugh, you dumb slick-ear."

"You're makin' *me* laugh, East; and I'm laughin' last. You made the mistake of not bein' sure Barney was dead. When he was dyin' he wrote a message in his own blood. Doc Smiley tested it for me. Do you want me to read it? All right, here it is!"

Slowly, his slitted eyes never leaving the face of Joe East, Steve took a piece of folded, brown paper from his pocket. With his extended left hand he gave the paper to Doctor Smiley.

"Read it, Doc."

Joe East's tongue licked his dry lips, and his eyes shifted to the crackling paper. The doctor held it toward the light.

"It says, 'Gold hidden in the well. Joe East shot me!"

Steve was watching Joe East, who was hunching forward a little. His left hand went to his throat, his fingers fumbling at his collar, as though to unfasten it. But Steve saw the flash of metal in his right hand, and fired as Joe East's hand came up.

The bullet jerked East half around and he fell to his knees.

"Steady, everybody!" snapped Runt. Slowly Steve walked forward, reached down and took a nickle-plated derringer from East's unresisting fingers. The men were staring at him, all except Tuck Doble, who was edging backwards. He had forgotten Omaha, until the muzzle of a revolver dug sharply into his spine.

"You better stick around, Tuck," warned Omaha, and took Tuck's gun away from him.

"This is the gun that killed Barney Macrae," stated Steve. "I've got the bullet. This gun is a smooth-bore, and

there are no land marks on the bullet that killed Barney. I knew the brand of shells that Barney Macrae shoots; and the ones I stole from Doc Smiley wasn't the kind at all. I reckon there was a gun battle, and Joe East filled Barney's gun with the shells he bought for his little pocket gun."

Steve placed the little gun on the bar and turned to Hickey.

"You can speak yore little piece, Al. I reckon you've got somethin' to say to us, ain't you?"

"I reckon I've been an awful fool," said the sheriff huskily. "I backed the wrong man—and lost. Joe East and Tuck Doble came to me and asked me to help them out of a tight spot. They said they went in to see Barney Macrae the mornin' after the robbery, and in an argument over a cattle deal Barney pulled a gun. Joe East said he killed Macrae, but with things the way they was between him and Macrae, he'd have a hard time provin' self-defense. He asked me to go with him to find the body, and we framed up the story we told. I didn't know he killed Macrae, tryin' to force him to tell where he hid the gold."

"If I was you, Al," said Steve, "I'd head west tonight, and keep right on goin'. Yo're all through as an officer."

"Before you go, Al," said Runt, "I'd like to borry yore bracelets. Bein' as I ain't openly resigned, I'll be takin' yore job."

Al handed the handcuffs to Runt, who promptly snapped them on Tuck Doble's wrists.

"You ain't got a thing on me, feller," said Tuck.

"Not much. Murder, robbery, rustlin'."

Doctor Smiley had been examining Joe East, but no one had been paying any attention. He turned to Steve.

"East might want to make a statement; he's conscious."

The crowd spread in a circle around Joe East.

"Doc says it's a blind cañon," whispered East huskily. "But it's all right. See that the L4L cattle are brought back. I've got some money in the bank to make up any losses. Go easy on the boys; it was all my fault.

"Kane . . . where . . . are . . . you?"

"Right here, Joe."

"I can see you now, Steve. Too late to write now, but everybody listen; I ain't got a relative on earth, and I want Steve . . . to . . . have . . . the . . . my . . . ranch. He's . . . He's . . . too . . . smart . . . to . . . punch . . . cows . . . I . . . know . . . I . . . tried . . . to . . . kill . . . him. *Hasta . . . luego. . . .*"

The room was silent for several moments. Runt turned to Zeb Hill, whose face was twisted painfully.

"Zeb," he said, "I want you to take the boys and bring back them L4L cows from Rancho Verdugo. After that, you can go."

"Free—you mean?" gasped Zeb.

"You ain't tryin' to start no argument with me, are you, Zeb?"

Zeb jerked around and looked at Steve, his eyes wide.

"Is—is it all right with you, Steve?"

"Go ahead, Zeb," said Steve wearily. "I ain't mad at anybody. Bill and Harry are tied up in the L4L ranch-house; so you might as well take them along."

"Wait a minute!" snorted Runt. "Don't you pelicans go near that ranch-house until we've taken away that gold. You may be contrite as hell and grateful all over; but in my estimation, yo're jist a lot of rustlers."

CHAPTER XXIV

"BETTER THAN CHREESTMUS!"

OMAHA went with Steve and Doctor Smiley, hurrying back to tell the folks what had happened.

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Omaha. "Ten

thousand dollars reward for findin' the gold! It's all yours, too; I didn't help none."

"You told me where it was, Omaha. When we was comin' back from Rancho Verdugo, I asked you where the gold was hidden, and you said, 'Well—', and that's where it was."

"Well, I'll be danged! But I didn't mean that kind of a well."

"And you get the Quarter-Circle JHE, Steve," reminded the doctor. "I believe that verbal will holds good."

Mary and Mrs. Fernandez were out in front of the house, waiting with Mrs. Smiley.

"All set!" yelled Omaha. "Steve cleared it all up. Joe East robbed the train and killed Barney Macrae, and Joe East stole all the L4L cattle, but we'll get 'em back. And me and Steve found all that gold—and Joe East gave his ranch to Steve. How's that?"

"Hallo, Steve!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernandez. "You mak' heem eat off your hand, eh? *Viva, Esteban!*"

"Steve, is this all true?" asked Mary, nearly hysterical.

He took hold of her two arms. "Steady," he said. "It's all true. Yore father is cleared of any blame, and the L4L will still be a dad-blamed good cow-ranch."

"And I won't have to go away, will I, Steve?"

"No, I reckon not, Mary. You and me better stay around."

Hastily Doctor Smiley shooed the rest of them into the house and closed the door. Omaha flopped into a chair and took a deep breath. Doctor Smiley went over beside the lamp and studied that piece of brown paper he had read in the saloon. Then he reached in a drawer and drew out another smaller, torn piece of brown paper, which he examined.

"This ees better than Chreestmus," said Mrs. Fernandez. "Better than Fort' of Ju-ly and—and *Cinco de Maya*, all tweested togedder."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" said Mrs. Smiley.

"It's shore been a strain on me," said Omaha. "There was times when I almost *had* to think."

The door opened and Steve came in with Mary. Her eyes looked very bright in the lamplight, and Steve's ears were red. The old doctor turned and looked at them, tilting his head to look over his glasses.

"Steve," he said softly, "I—hm-m-m! This note I read in the saloon doesn't seem to be a part of the same piece of paper you brought me for the blood test."

"Just between us, it ain't, Doc. The one poor old Barney Macrae left—if he left—wasn't very clear—so I killed a chicken tonight, printed a new one, and brought it along."

"You mean—you bluffed him, Steve? You bluffed Joe East?"

"There wasn't anythin' else left for me to do, Doc. He realized he had me beat—in sight—but the way I played the hand made him think I had an ace in the hole."

The old doctor chuckled softly and looked at Mary.

"I think you'll like Arizona, Mary," he said.

"*Viva Esteban!*" said Mrs. Fernandez. "I like to go home and clean the 'ouse. W'at you say, Omaha? You go weeth me?"

"Guess not," replied Omaha. "I'll help Steve clean up a range full of rustlers any time but I ain't never had the strength to help anybody clean house."

THE END

NIGHT PATROL

By THEODORE FREDENBURGH

SERGEANT INVESTIGATOR BILL BAILEY, of the Divisional Intelligence Section, had successfully negotiated the crumbling man trap at Mandre', passed the charnel-house called Dead Man's Curve and weathered the German artillery bombardment that screamed and blasted among the roofs of Beaumont. Now he was on the straight road that led to his destination in the fortified town of Raulincourt.

Black-eyed, black haired and sturdy as a young oak, he strode confidently on his way.

The moon, like a pale apple with a slice gone, hung motionless in the western sky. Lighted by its eerie glow the mud-rutted road beneath his feet stretched desolate and silent away into the misty distance.

A blast of pistol fire blazed from the corner of the altar and bullets splintered the benches and walls about Bailey's head. He aimed at the flashes and rapped off a clip.

On his right a wire net ten feet high and strung with small bunches of painted burlap camouflaged the road from prying eyes on the high slopes of Mont Sec, the German stronghold that stood sentinel over the towns held by American troops.

Beyond the screen Very lights flared; single lights and strings of mixed colors; white, blue, red and green they soared majestically until one by one they winked out and dropped like glowing coals back to earth. Guns rumbled sullenly in the distance. An invisible German bombing plane purred in a faraway corner of the sky. Over the immediate reach of the sector a stillness heavy with menace held the area rigid.

Bailey's swinging stride had brought him rapidly towards his objective. Close ahead of him the camouflage screen ended abruptly against the remains of the outermost house of Raulincourt. Bailey passed the spot without looking right or left.

The next instant he stopped dead in his tracks and even he, accustomed to war in a thousand forms, felt his heart surge upward as a cold point of steel flicked against the back of his neck and remained there.

"Countersign," a gruff voice demanded.

"Gaspard," Bailey said, slightly breathless.

"Turn around and don't make no breaks," the voice snarled.

Bailey obediently faced about.

A lean American with his helmet tilted over his eye snapped the point of his bayonet under Bailey's chin and held it there.

"Identification discs," he commanded brutally. "Okay, corporal, look him over."

Another soldier came from the shadows holstering a pistol as he walked into the moonlight.

"Covering each other," Bailey thought. "Those birds are loaded for bear."

"What's the lay-out, fellers?" he said affably.

"Hold your trap," the corporal cracked at him, "and dig up them discs. Never mind!" he spat as Bailey raised his hands. "I'll get them myself."

Ungently he snapped Bailey's blouse open, unfastened his shirt and with the twin aluminum discs that hung by a leather thong from Bailey's neck in one hand, growled to the sentinel who held Bailey at his bayonet's point—

"If he makes a break, skewer him."

He flashed a tiny flashlight inside his other cupped hand and examined the discs.

"Okay," he said. "What outfit, sergeant?"

"Division Headquarters," Bailey replied steadily.

"Okay. Button up. It's him," he announced to the sentry. "Slack off. Officer of the day told us to be on the lookout for ya," he informed Bailey. "Every relief has a list of people with business in this stretch of road, see."

"I'll say you don't give a guy a chance." Bailey hitched his belt up and grinned.

"We don't aim to," the corporal replied. "You're reporting to Captain Yost, ain't you?"

"Yeah."

"He's located in a low building just this side of the church. Y'might as well leave them discs outside because you'll need 'em before you get to where y'goin'."

"Thanks. How far is it to Yost's hangout?"

"Quarter of a mile. Keep to the middle of the road. If you go prowlin' around in the shadows you'll get your appendix removed free. So long."

Bailey shrugged and moved on.

"They're tough," he muttered, "but no tougher than they need to be."

In his role of sergeant of infantry on special duty from Division Headquarters, he swiftly reviewed in his mind the complicated situation which had brought him into the swampy hell-hole facing Mont Sec.

He knew, without seeing it, that guns sank to the wheel hubs in stinking ooze. That infantry dug-outs were a foot and a half deep in scummy green water and that sentries stood knee deep in a soupy yellow flood that turned their feet into ugly blue clubs.

In a couple of spots a good five acres of water, scum crusted, chest deep, lay athwart the infantry positions and defied all efforts to consolidate them into the five hundred mile trench system of the Western Front.

It was by way of these mucky cesspools that German patrols successfully infiltrated night after night, ambushing and slaughtering everyone they found.

One night it was a butchered ration cart detail, mess sergeant and mule sprawled in a welter of blood among the polluted contents of the cart; the

next a grist of luckless soldiers cut down when they thought themselves safe behind the iron band of their lines; again it was a lonely sentinel dumped gently at the door of a barricaded headquarters dug-out, to wallow in the red ooze from a throat slashed from ear to ear.

The sentries were tough and they should be!

Bailey remembered clearly what his chief, Major Colton, had said when detailing him to this job.

"Somebody on the American side is head-man of this business, Bailey, and I want him turned up. You are to go up there to Raulincourt in the rôle of special guard for two American women, social workers, who run a canteen in the town, and do what they can to help the troops quartered there. Captain Yost, who is in charge, has been raising hell about the unmilitary responsibility he feels for their safety so we are relieving him of it by sending you as the personal guardian of the ladies. Yost will supply men for guard duty and he understands that you are to have a free hand. It is a bit irregular but so is the presence of women in a town a few hundred yards from our front line trenches. At any rate it plants you there with an obvious job to do. What neither Yost or anybody else is aware of is that you are to find out who is running the show. Trust nobody and don't be squeamish when, and if, you find the right man or men. Bring them in alive if you can—if not, bury them out there. That's all. Good luck."

Bailey had saluted smartly; said "Right, sir," and started off.

YOST was up when Bailey, after passing two more sentry posts reached the dark building near the church. Yost was a blond, slightly bald, man with direct blue eyes and a lean face that was deeply marked from nose to chin with deep creases that gave him the appearance of complete and utter disillusionment.

"Glad to see you, sergeant," he said in a deep quiet voice. "Drop your kit and have a drink."

Yost took a bottle of cognac from a concrete shelf behind him and set it on the smooth wood that surfaced a six inch thick slab of concrete mounted on a concrete pedestal in the center of the room.

"Thanks," said Bailey. "Hope you'll pardon my curiosity, sir," he said, "but I have never been in a place like this before. It's solid concrete all around, isn't it?"

Yost smiled indulgently.

"Raulincourt is a concealed fortress," he said, placing his fingers together before him on the table. "Every building in town has behind its own wall a seven foot wall of concrete reinforced with one inch metal rods. There are machine gun posts, observation posts, loop-holes for riflemen, casemates for artillery and even places where grenade throwers may in a pinch practice their art on an attacking enemy—and," he concluded, "it is German planned and German built and is a thorn in the side of our friends across the way."

"We captured it and they would like to have it back, eh?" Bailey nodded.

"Why not? Morning after morning out of pure rage at their impotence they waste several hundred rounds of shell on this place. Certainly they must know, better than anybody else, that short of siege guns of the heaviest sort they are helpless to make a dent in it."

"But patrols get in," Bailey hazarded.

"Yes." Yost replied. "Patrols get in—and they do a particularly disagreeable kind of damage. That is why I am as jumpy as an impresario about those confounded women."

"Well!" Bailey grinned wryly. "According to my orders I am to relieve you of them. I suppose as soon as I get the

hang of this place I'll have the wizzy-wazzies myself."

"I'll do what I can to help you," Yost said, pouring himself a drink, "but you will have to figure your own system out. "They are down the street a piece near what we call Lily Alley," he went on, gesturing toward the side wall. "It's the main communication trench, and about the only one that isn't waist deep in mud-slop. Our men use it to reach the front line, and they call it Lily Alley because it leads to the place where they are most likely to be knocked off if they escape damage in the trench itself."

"They picked a tough place to pitch camp," Bailey commented. "How the devil did they get up here anyway?"

"I know this—no Army man in his right senses would permit it. My private opinion is that somewhere the great American game of politics has been played; otherwise there would be more vigorous official action."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"I've done everything to get them out of this town." Yost folded his arms and scowled. "I've complained every chance I got but somebody or some organization has a louder voice at Army Headquarters than mine. It isn't that they don't do wonders for the men. They do," he admitted, dropping his hands to the table, "and if they ran only the ordinary chances I shouldn't care so much. It's this business of infiltrating enemy patrols that has put my wind up and made me wish a thousand times a day that they were anywhere but here."

"Yeah," Bailey grunted, draining the last drops from the bottom of the cup. "D'you mind if I have another spot?" He tipped a drink into a glass and then continued. "Is anybody keeping an eye on them now?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Hargrave keeps a guard posted at the door of their cellar. He's new. Been here about a week. A good officer, too—much better than the run of young lieutenants the schools turn out. He'll be here any minute."

"I'd like to meet him," Bailey said, lighting a cigaret. "I suppose the women are in bed now?"

"The fact, is they work about half the night. You'd find them up if you went down there."

"Good, I'll take a look."

"You'll find the place easily enough. Count two hundred paces from the center of the church door. The house has an old flagstone leaning against the front of it. Lily Alley flanks the building. There's a low door near the rear of the building. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Good luck. I'll tell Hargrave to show you a spot to sleep in."

"Okay." Bailey grinned affably and nodding toward his pack said, "Mind if I leave that here for now?"

"Not at all, sergeant."

Outside in the moonlight Bailey scratched his chin reflectively.

"Lieutenant Hargrave," he mused, "turned up one week ago. That would be Thursday. The first raid was on Friday night. I'll have a look at Hargrave."

Off toward Mont Sec on his right a clatter of machine guns broke out, riveting the distant haze of the moonlight as Bailey stepped off along the road. A sudden shriek and the cracking noise of shells bursting somewhere above sent him diving for safety close to the wall of the nearest building.

Further on, the church, its steeple hanging drunkenly askew, marked a jog in the street that split the village. Before it Bailey hesitated a minute marking the center of the building before beginning to count two hundred paces to his destination.

He was about to forward through the night when he flung himself toward the building in a headlong dive. From the corner of his eye he had caught the movement of a swift object falling from the church steeple above and even as his

body struck the ground a heavy stone chunked heavily to earth a few feet away. Without pausing to investigate further he sprang up and dashed at the closed door of the church. His pistol flashed from its holster and he struck the door with a crash that set loose tiles skittering from the roof.

His second rush splintered the door and he crouched in darkness beside the door listening into the shadows for a sound which would betray the presence of men in the place. Cautiously then he started to circle the room, using the rows of half-broken benches as a screen.

The moonlight coming in at the door threw a weird glow on the broken altar, now bare of the objects that usually adorned it. The silence was brittle with suspense. Bailey cautiously moved forward, every sense alert for the sound which would signal the opening of hostilities.

It came with devastating suddenness! A blast of pistol fire blazed from the corner of the altar and bullets splintered the benches and wall about Bailey's head. With calm deliberation he aimed at the flashes and rapped off a clip. Lunging forward a little, he let the empty clip fall unheeded to the floor and jammed another home. Bullets whanged into the floor where he had been an instant previous and before he could fire again a clatter of running feet told him his quarry was fleeing.

Bailey sprang up, dived headlong toward the altar, dashed behind it and then, stumbling forward over the refuse which cluttered the place, realized suddenly that he was alone—that his quarry had escaped by some exit in the rear.

A sudden hubbub at the front door made him stop abruptly.

A flashlight struck sharply through cracks in the denuded altar casting little bars of light around Bailey's feet.

"Hold everything," he yelled.

"Come out," a hoarse voice commanded, "and come with your hands high!"

Bailey holstered his gun and walked noisily around the end of the altar.

As he came into the blinding beam of the flash a new voice spoke from the doorway.

"What's wrong here," it said.

Outlined in the flooding moonlight an officer, pistol in hand, stepped briskly in.

"Here's one of them," the man with the harsh voice replied. "Step out here, you! And watch your step," he growled.

Bailey walked toward the little group until the soldier's bayonets were almost at his throat. The man with the light was a sergeant, Bailey noted.

"I never saw you around here before," the sergeant growled. With a quick motion he snapped the pistol from Bailey's holster.

"My name is Bailey," Bailey said without heat. "Captain Yost will vouch for me."

The officer came forward then.

"This may be all right," he said to Bailey's captor. "What are you doing here, sergeant?" he asked.

"Somebody dropped a rock on me as I stopped before the church, sir," Bailey replied. "I shot it out with the guy in there. He got away through the back way."

"Take him along," the officer said. "We'll have to identify you," he said curtly across his shoulder. "Go on! I'll be with you in a minute," he commanded, walking toward the altar.

The sergeant herded Bailey into the road. A minute later the officer came out.

CAPTAIN YOST was in his shirt sleeves before a wall map when the guard led by Hargrave shoved Bailey into his quarters.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What

have you got Sergeant Bailey under guard for?"

"Identification!" The officer saluted smartly. "There was a ruckus down at the church and when we got there we found this man."

"Turn him loose," Yost waved the sergeant and his men back. "This is the man Major Colton sent up," he explained. "Bailey, this is Lieutenant Hargrave."

Bailey's sharp black eyes took in every detail of Hargrave as the two men shook hands.

Brown haired and pink cheeked with the first weathering of campaign darkening his skin, he was typical of a thousand young Americans rushed into the service, and officers' harness, when war was declared. And yet Bailey sensed a maturity about him; a razor-edged something buried deep in his eyes and showing itself in the faintly cynical droop at the corners of a mouth.

Hargrave shook hands cordially.

"We're getting back to Stone Age tactics," he grinned. "Who do you suppose heaved that rock?"

"Take a squad of men at daybreak and search that place. By God," Yost ejaculated with tense determination, "I'll get to the bottom of this damned deviltry. Did you see the man, Bailey?"

"No, sir, but unless I have gone off on my pistol shooting he'll have marks when we do find him."

"Hit him?"

"It was dark and I was firing at flashes but an inspection of all troops in quarters tomorrow might turn him up."

"One of our men," Yost said thoughtfully. "Damn it! Have we got spies and traitors right here amongst us."

"Do you think, sir, that a lone German is going to hide out in a smashed church steeple in order to heave rocks at a passing soldier?"

"No, I don't. See to it, Hargrave. Tomorrow morning without previous notice inspection in quarters. I'll do it myself."

"If you put a mark on anyone we'll find it," Hargrave grinned enthusiastically at Bailey. "I'd like to have a look around that church too, sir," he said to Yost.

"Scour it from top to bottom. As for you, Bailey, you'd better bunk down here tonight. Those damned women!" he exploded. "Now do you see, Bailey, why I want them to get out of this town?"

"I'll go over and see them now if you don't mind, sir," Bailey interjected. "That's what I came up here for."

"You had better wait for daylight."

"I like to finish a job once I start," Bailey insisted. "And anyway that bird won't try out on me again tonight."

"You think not?" Yost smiled cynically.

"If he does, I'll plug him, sure," Bailey promised.

"Have it your way. Take him down there, Hargrave, and keep to the middle of the road."

"Very good, sir. Come on, Bailey; let's give it another try."

"I'll take my pack." Bailey hoisted his equipment and with it dangling from one shoulder he saluted Captain Yost.

"Good night, sir," he said pleasantly.

"Good night. Look out for yourself."

"Thanks," Bailey followed Hargrave into the moonlit street.

"Damned quiet war you have around here," he said as he and Hargrave walked along the street.

"Ever hear of the calm before a storm?" Hargrave chuckled. "This place is a mad house. One minute it's like this. The next minute all hell is loose."

"Yeah," said Bailey. "Captain Yost tells me the town is rock-ribbed and reinforced with iron bars."

Hargrave laughed. "Boy, howdy! All these innocent looking stone houses with tile roofs cover concrete fortifications."

"Captain Yost told me."

"You'll like Yost," Hargrave went on,

"he's a fine officer—knows this war business every which way. He's considerate, too."

They had come opposite the church with its sad, sagging steeple and shattered roof.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to look around in there," Bailey proposed, stopping.

"Sure thing," Hargrave's voice was keen.

"You have the light," said Bailey. "Lead in. I'll cover you from the dark."

"All right. Keep to one side behind me."

"Good. Let's go."

Without bothering to be cautious, Hargrave stepped boldly into the church and with the flash splashing the cluttered interior with hard bright light he skirted the benches to the spot where the bullets had splintered the wall around where Bailey had lain. The empty shells from Bailey's pistol glittered in the beam of the light.

At the altar he paused to note the splintered edge where Bailey's return fire had torn through the flimsy wood.

Behind the altar a rubble of broken tile, plaster and stones lay several inches deep.

"Nobody here," Hargrave whispered. "Could I have the light for a minute?"

Bailey flashed the light on the rubble at his feet. Then going back to the splintered edge of the altar he shone the light on the rubble and searched carefully, covering the stuff foot by foot.

"What's up," said Hargrave, crowding forward. "Did you lose something?"

"I'm looking for something,' Bailey muttered. "There. I—"

He dropped to one knee and pulling some broken tiles aside he picked up two bits of dully glittering brass.

"Empty cartridges," Hargrave noted. "What kind are they?"

"Can't tell off hand," Bailey evaded. "Let's get out."

"Okay!" Hargrave turned back. "Throw the light this way," he called from the darkness. "This place is too damned spooky for comfort."

Once more in the moonlit road with the shell scarred houses throwing long shadows as the moon fell towards the west Bailey lightly jingled the empty cartridges in his pocket and wondered who had fired the small caliber pistol from which the empty cartridges had been ejected and who had gone back to collect the empty cartridges for, of at least a dozen shots fired at him, he had found only two empty shells. Those two had been so well hidden as to be invisible to a hasty searcher. Someone had been covering up!

EMILY DONNERGAN was spare and muscular and came of fighting Irish stock. War to her meant fight as surely as it had meant fight to countless hundreds of her forebears. But being a woman and unable by law to bear arms she did the next best thing; organized a canteen and by pulling strings from New York district leaders to War Department potentates she had landed in France, and the long arm of political coincidence being what it is, got herself moved from one dull railroad station to another until at last she was planted, with her stove and pans and a buxom blond young woman whom she had known back home, at the entrance of Lily Alley under the guns of the enemy.

There she and her assistant stuck: Emily Donnergan and Mazie Brown.

Emmy and Mazie were the personal concern of every man who passed through Lily Alley; and woe to him who made off-side passes or remarks to or about them.

When Bailey and Hargrave, passing the guard outside, walked into the stifling hole where the two women sweated and cooked and sewed and washed, Emmy was busily stirring a huge pot of

coffee that rested on a grating set across an open fire, and Mazie was sloshing a shirt in an iron tub of soapy water.

"No coffee, Emmy," Hargrave said. "I came to show Sergeant Bailey where you live. He's going to be your watchdog from now on."

"Watchdog is ut?" Emmy shouted, dropping the ladle. "Sure, I could knock the daylights out of ten boches the like of thim that wint through here prisoners a week ago. Watchdog indeed!"

"You ought to go back—at least until these enemy patrols are under our thumb," Bailey suggested.

"Nothing doing!" Mazie came down from her wash-tub to face Bailey across the little counter behind which she and Emmy worked.

"You can't get anywhere with them, sergeant," Hargrave said. "I've been trying for a week."

"Division Headquarters would like us to get out, eh, Sergeant Bailey?" Mazie leaned toward him across the counter and tapped a finger on the counter-top, "but we are not going to budge. We have a job to do up here. From this spot the German trenches are less than a thousand yards away, and it's a hundred yards less to ours.

"Those men—our men—out there, lean back on us. We are the only ones that meet them on human grounds. With everybody else it's war—bayonets—bullets—blood. This place is a little bit of home to them. Emmy and I are all the different kinds of women-folk they've left behind them. And when some of them die—in here, as they do sometimes—they call us by names we never heard before and are comforted. That's what we are here for; and we'll not budge for a lot of pudgy staff officers at Division Headquarters, so stuff that in your musette bag." Mazie sniffed and tossed her blond curls defiantly.

"Hear! Hear!" Hargrave cried. "Well, that sells me the medicine, professor. In fact," he concluded facetiously, "I think I shall go out and get myself shot or something just so I can call you names, Mazie."

"Get out of here, the both of you," Emmy chortled. "We got work to do and lord bless us, Mazie won't lift a finger if there's any uniforms to talk to. Get on, Mr. Hargrave, and you with your blarney, sergeant! Clear out."

AT ONE o'clock, when the moon disappearing behind a rising wall of sullen clouds plunged the town deep in gloom, Hargrave, after seeing the guard posted outside the canteen, left Bailey at the smelly dug-out where he was to sleep.

But sleep was not in him. The encompassing dark settling like a sinister black canopy over the town stirred him to wakefulness. And he was not alone.

The rumble of guns, which had been fitful and distant while the moon was up, now sharpened. Behind the town towards the American rear the night flamed red. Guns cracked and boomed. Shells swished overhead. The enemy, not to be outdone, hurled cylinders of explosives against the American batteries; they roared over the town with grinding shrieks and shook the earth with jarring thunder.

Machine guns stuttered, biting redly into the night; stuttered and fell silent only to burst out again. Flares boomed shedding their hard white light over mucky trenches and wire entanglements. The endless display of Very lights increased three-fold. First one side, then the other swept the opposing lines with the red hot rivets of war.

Bailey listened to it for awhile and then to ease his vague worry about the woman in Lily Alley, settled his helmet tightly and went out into the blackness of the street.

The dissonant fury of war was gathering force. A wilderness of bursting

shells enveloped the town but did not touch it.

Bailey wondered.

"A fortified town," said his brain, "should be bombarded constantly." There might, he admitted, be a hundred reasons for sparing this one now. But the thought that sprang full-fashioned and certain into his mind was—patrols! The devil protects its own, he thought, and the German artillery would spare an area in which its combat patrols were operating. After they pulled out —say an hour or so before dawn—

Bailey grunted and walked rapidly towards his post at the canteen of Emmy and Mazie.

He had walked for several minutes before he discovered that, confused by darkness, he had missed the alley. He swore softly and retraced his steps, keeping close to the black wall of the buildings lest he miss the blacker hole of the alley opening. At the end of several more minutes no alley had appeared. Thoroughly aroused now, he lifted his head to make the gaunt outline of the shattered church steeple against the starlit sky—and his breath hissed through his teeth.

The faintest trace of glow was visible—so faint was it that unless it came under the eye of a man trained on the observance of trifles it would have passed unnoticed. A mere fluff of light that must be escaping from a stronger, and hooded, glow. Bailey's mind raced. So the church was the key to it. Abruptly he sat down and drawing his hob-nailed boots from his feet, he pushed them under a near-by stone step. Then, from an inner pocket of his blouse he took a pair of cloth-topped slippers with a thin sole, and drew them on. Elastic sewed to the cloth tops at instep and ankle held the slippers tightly on his feet. Gun in hand then, he stole in swift silence toward the church.

Halfway to his objective, he went suddenly to ground in a tense crouch as an unmistakable odor assailed his nostrils. Krauts! That strange chemical odor of dye stuff and camphor that clung to German uniforms was long familiar to Bailey.

He crouched low and tried to pierce the darkness with his eyes even as his ears, pitched at their highest sensitivity, probed for a tell-tale sound—the tiny clink of metal, a boot scraping the stones, a whispered order—anything which would locate the menace that lay in the foul scent prickling his nostrils.

Then he had it!

A spark fainter than the glow of a distant lightning bug showed for an instant and was gone. But it was enough. The faint scrape of an iron nail against the stone was lost in the howling storm of shell-fire falling about the town. But that tiny, tell-tale, pinhead of a flame, struck from an iron shod boot, was enough.

Bailey crept closer until his sharp ears caught the cautious movement of a number of men moving in the deep gloom close to the buildings and headed— Quickly using the church steeple as a marker he guessed where the alley opening to Emmy and Mazie's canteen would be.

The patrol was half-way between!

Bailey's teeth gritted grimly together as, unhampered by equipment, he flitted like a shadow through the blackness fifty feet or more, then turning sharply at right angles, found himself against the buildings. The patrol slinking with deadly purpose along the buildings toward the alley was behind him now. Bailey felt his way along the buildings determined not to miss the narrow alley entrance this time. Seconds passed. His questing hand ran over windows—doorways—walls, until at last—the aperture. Bailey felt of the buildings on both sides, tested the slope of the ground inside the alley and went forward.

The guard challenged him sharply.

"Sergeant Bailey," Bailey whispered.

"Kraut patrol on the street right behind me. For God's sake, be still.

"Okay. Come on."

"They are fifty or sixty feet from the alley. Watch out, I'll be back in a minute." He slipped down the steps into the candle-lit interior of the canteen.

Emmy and Mazie's greetings died unspoken as Bailey's grim face warned them into silence.

"Patrol outside," he hissed. "Barricade the door. The guard and I can hold them if they don't come on us two ways at once. Anyway, the noise will rouse out the guard."

"Now you listen to me," Emmy began.

"Shut up!" Bailey cracked. "Barricade the door behind me and dig up any horse-pistols or hat-pins you got, in case of a break through."

Mazie's laugh followed him as he closed the door. An instant later he heard the heavy bar drop into place.

"A kraut just passed the end of the alley," the guard whispered tensely.

"Got any grenades?"

"Yeah—two."

"Gimme one—and flatten out when I heave this."

"Okay."

Twenty feet towards the alley mouth guttural whispers, accentuated by the close walls on either side, reached the two men lying side by side flat on the ground.

The whispers died. The faint scrape of dragging feet sounded—the rub of leather against khaki.

Bailey squeezed his companion's arm —counted three—and, heaving the grenade, flattened out.

The explosion shook Bailey from head to foot. Men shrieked in agony. Somebody shouted an order in German. Screams ripped the air.

"Chuck the other one," Bailey yelled to the guard, "and let 'em have it."

As the second ear-bursting explosion came, Bailey's pistol banged a staccato accompaniment to the groans and squeals of agony from the shattered patrol. Beside him the guard's rifle sounded— *whack! whack! whack!* Firing rapidly, he emptied his magazine and, as Bailey shoved a new clip into his pistol, the guard fired his last shot and clicked a new clip into place.

"Hold it," Bailey commanded.

No return fire came from the patrol. Men were shouting in the street.

"Corporal of the Guard," the guard bawled. "We got 'em all." Bailey felt him rise from his place beside him.

A sudden blast of pistol fire streamed from a point near the alley mouth.

"You—!" Bailey cried, and his own gun blasted back at the crouching figure disclosed by the flashes.

The stricken guard pawed him an instant while death rattled in his throat, then slid away.

A SUDDEN storm of men erupted at the alley mouth. A flashlight splashed on a shambles of shattered and bleeding flesh. The grenades had done their work well. A blood bath drained from the walls and ran in rivulets on the ground. Of them all, one figure, wounded but conscious, remained; an officer who grinned in gray defiance at the men who stood over him.

Bailey gazed down at him. There was neither pity nor hate in his glance. It was war, and butchery and death were too common a sight to stir any emotion at all.

"He plugged the guard," Bailey said to the sergeant who seemed to be in charge. "The canteen women are okay," he added wearily. "We'd better see them, I guess."

Emmy met him as the door opened. Her eyes wide with a tragic question bored into Bailey's.

"The kraut patrol is wiped out," he said dispassionately. "They killed the guard. You'd better not go out there."

He barred the door with his arm as Emmy started forward.

"You look as if they'd about finished you, too," said Mazie from behind the counter. "Come in here."

"A shot of coffee would do fine," Bailey grinned.

"Oh!" Mazie ejaculated. "With your face laid wide open, you talk about coffee. Lean over here, you idiot."

"Huh?" Bailey brushed the side of his head with his hand and winced. His hand came away sticky with blood. "A splinter from the grenades must have hit me."

"I have no doubt," Mazie said with fine sarcasm. "Lean over here until I can clean it and put a dressing on."

Yost, with Hargrave at his heels, came in as Mazie finished the dressing.

"What's the story, sergeant?" Yost said stiffly.

Hargrave glanced at Bailey's slipper-clad feet, and his eyes lifted probing Bailey's face. Then he moved back along the counter with a faintly puzzled expression shadowing his features.

"Nothing much, sir. I flushed a kraut patrol on the street. It was headed this way but I got here before them and gave them a dose of their own medicine."

"Meaning what, please."

"Ambush. The guard and I wiped them out."

"I saw," said Yost. "You would have done better had you taken some of them. You know, of course, that much valuable information is to be had from captured members of patrols. That officer, for instance."

"Sorry, sir," said Bailey. "That officer played possum and shot the guard. I had to get him."

"Yes, of course. Well—" he turned to Emmy and Mazie and again smiled coldly— "I trust this demonstrates the inadvisability of your remaining here any longer."

"Well, it doesn't then," Emmy came back sharply. "Not to me, anyway. We're soldiers like all the rest and it would have gone hard with any German patrols that broke in here."

"Doubtless," said Yost with a scornful droop of his eyelids. He turned to Bailey. "You had better have the dressing station tend to that cut tonight," he said. "And go down to the evacuation hospital tomorrow for proper treatment."

"Go down?" Bailey was incredulous.

"Yes. A few days there—get an injection against lockjaw and have a stitch or two taken."

Bailey's eyes had narrowed. Without any definite movement his face had stiffened to granite hardness.

"Is that an order, sir?" he said, standing to attention.

"Yes," said Yost. "I shouldn't need to tell a sergeant from Division Headquarters what the regulations concerning wounds are."

"Certainly not, sir. I shall leave in the morning," Bailey saluted stiffly.

"You'd better get to bed now," Yost said in a more kindly tone. "Hargrave, have that mess in the alley cleaned up at once, and post a double guard—one man here and one man at the mouth of the alley. Good night!" he saluted the women and went out.

In Hargrave's eyes as he turned to Bailey there was a gleam that Bailey did not miss.

"I'm sorry you are going, sergeant," he said. "I had hoped to see more of you."

"I'll go down," Bailey said. "Orders are orders."

Hargrave seemed about to reply but instead turned toward the door as the sergeant, whose men were cleaning up the mess in the alley came in.

"What about that guard?" the sergeant asked, as if he were requesting the correct time.

"Lay him aside, somewhere," Hargrave replied. "I'll notify the chaplain

tomorrow. At least he'll get a decent burial."

"I'll get along now, if you don't need me," Bailey suggested.

"That's all right—get some sleep," Hargrave tapped Bailey's shoulder. "We may have more than a patrol on us before dawn."

"Let's hope not," said Bailey as he went out.

Before the church, Bailey paused again.

"That damned signal light," he muttered, and with a shrug he went in.

Without a flash light he was handicapped, but with a clear memory of his last visit he went silently on his light soled shoes to the altar, and passing around the end of it found himself again among the rubble where he had found the empty cartridges. Somewhere back here he knew there must be a ladder or a stairway that led upwards—and somewhere up there was a signaling device of some kind. Stepping carefully and without a sound, he felt his way around the dark walls.

Abruptly he froze, listening.

A second or two later it came again—the faint but unmistakable sound of metal touching metal.

Bailey's hand felt to the holstered pistol at his belt. His fingers clutched frantically at the empty holster. Then he remembered, and swore silently. He had laid the gun on the counter at the canteen while Mazie had dressed his face. Then Yost had come and the gun was forgotten.

Somewhere above his head someone was moving cautiously about. There were faint scrapings and clinkings and at last as Bailey waited, tense in the darkness below, a cautious footstep grated above him. Then a stair creaked and guided by the sound Bailey glided toward the man who was stealthily descending the stairs.

Bailey dived, knocking the man's feet from under him. In an instant he was struggling with a man as slippery as an eel. He thrashed and twisted, using elbows, knees and feet to break Bailey's grip—and break it he did by suddenly crashing his knees with Bailey's middle. Bailey groaned with pain and his fingers slacked their grip for an instant. But it was enough. The man tore free and was gone.

Bailey scrambled after him, but at the back door of the church he knew it was too late. Pitch darkness confronted him. To find a needle in a haystack would be easy compared to tracking down an active and fleeing man here.

He gripped his fists tight in impotent fury and self accusation.

This mood flashed away as his gripping fist discovered something clinging to his nails and fingers. Barely able to believe his good fortune, he carefully rolled the clinging tendrils of hair into a ball and put them carefully into his pocket. Then he crawled on hands and knees, searching the floor where the struggle had taken place. The grist was scanty, but Bailey's spirits were high as he again passed around the end of the altar and to the street. In his pocket with the cartridges were a piece of olive drab uniform cloth—a button and a fragment of a collar ornament.

Back in his own dug-out he examined each object carefully. Of them all the half dozen fine strands of blond hair that lay cupped in his hands brought a faint whistle from his lips. He drew the strands through his fingers and then sat wrapped in thought for a moment. At last he nodded and taking time to affix a new dressing to his injured face, which was thick with oozing blood, he went out doors again and walked rapidly to the alley-way. He got by the guards without difficulty and in a moment was facing the blond Mazie across the little counter.

"I forgot my gun," he said.

"Emmy has it. How does your face feel?"

"Okay. It's just a scratch—part of the day's work."

"Emmy, Sergeant Bailey wants his gun."

"It's right there under the counter—Land sakes, Mazie, you saw me put it there."

Mazie laid the gun on the counter.

Bailey snapped the clip out, saw that it was empty, and put in a new one.

"Sorry I have to run off," he grinned. "See you later—maybe."

In the darkness of the street he scowled blackly.

A CLAMMY dawn was touching the eastern sky when Bailey, having retrieved his shoes from under the step, crouched in the shadows of a doorway across the street, watched Yost and Hargrave, muffled against the damp, leave Yost's quarters and walk rapidly towards Lily Alley.

Bailey stood up. His legs were stiff and he shivered in the severe morning chill.

The shell fire, which had been incessant for the past three hours, had died away. Instead of high flying metal storming across the sky, occasional shells whined dismally and burst, now here, now there, with a dull metallic clatter. The dawn hush dripped crooked and bloody fingers over the muck-mired trenches and swamps that circled Raulincourt. A miasmatic mist blew wetly on the rising wind of morning. Sickly sweet, the scent of decomposing flesh touched the breeze.

Before Yost's door Bailey paused an instant, and then pushing the door back strode boldly in.

In the light of a pair of half consumed candles which smoked darkly in the draught caused by Bailey's entrance, he saw Yosts bunk had quite obviously not been slept in.

On the table the brandy bottle stood by a tin cup. Bailey calmly poured himself a generous drink. The brandy warmed him and lighting a cigaret he began a hasteless but rapid prowl around the room. He poked into piles of maps and orders, opened drawers and shuffled through the miscellaneous objects he found there. Beneath Yost's bunk stood a pair of boots made of fine leather. Bailey went over these with care, feeling down into the toes and tapping the soles and heels with his ear cocked against the sound. An officer's small trunk stood locked beside the boots. Bailey sighed gently as he hauled it into the open. Then with quickly indrawn breath he knelt and snatched from beneath the bunk a soiled uniform coat and shirt. Crossing quickly to the table, he spread the coat out. A grunt of satisfaction escaped him.

Reaching into his pocket, he drew out the miscellaneous objects he had picked up behind the altar in the church.

A twisted and broken collar ornament fastened to the collar of the coat, when straightened, fitted the piece of collar ornament he had found at the church. The button and fragment of cloth exactly replaced the same items missing from the coat.

Then Bailey grinned as he poked his finger through a hole with faintly scorched edges that went in at the shoulder, passed through the small shoulder-pad of the coat and came out at the back. There was no blood on the cloth.

"Not bad," he murmured, "for blind shooting at flashes in the dark. An inch closer and I'd have got him." An expression of cynical disbelief hardened his face. "Considerate Captain Yost!" he muttered. "Commanding officer in the town—jeez, that's rich."

With great care then he rearranged the trunk and boots. The coat and shirt he rolled around Yost's hairbrush which he took from a narrow shelf above the tin wash-basin. Then he crossed to the table, and pausing beside the brandy bottle, poured himself another drink be-

fore he stepped out doors to walk briskly to the dug-out which he had not occupied.

A moment later he re-emerged and struck off in the semidarkness towards Lily Alley.

YOST and Hargrave were talking by the little counter on which steaming mugs of coffee stood when Bailey came in.

Over the open fire Mazie fried bacon in a skillet. The odor of it filled the room. She nodded without speaking when Bailey waved a greeting to her.

"Well, Bailey," said Yost, "any more adventures?"

"I thought I saw you coming out of the church last night after that patrol was napooed," Hargrave said, glancing casually at Bailey's feet.

"You did," Bailey took a grateful drink of the coffee. "I ran into our friend who shot at me—or a friend of his," he said, setting his cup down.

"Did you catch him this time?" Yost smiled indulgently.

"Don't tell me you have him locked up somewhere?" said Hargrave.

"No," Bailey grinned unabashed. "I won't. The fact is, he kicked me in the belly and got away."

"Gone." Yost chuckled. "Sunk without trace, as the sailors say."

"Yeah," Bailey agreed dryly. "And since I must go to the hospital, I suppose I won't get another chance at him. Could I have some more coffee, Mazie?"

While Mazie poured the coffee, Bailey stared glumly into the slowly filling cup.

"Y'know what?" he said at last. "I've been trying to figure out how that patrol got into town."

"How do patrols get anywhere?" said Yost. "No defense system is perfect."

"I suppose that's right," Bailey admitted. "Those kraut patrol leaders must be damn clever."

"Nonsense," Yost contradicted him. "Our patrols do the same thing. It's part of the game just as your chance meeting with them, to their bad luck, is part of it."

"Amazing, isn't it?" said Hargrave. "If Bailey hadn't been prowling around when he should have been in bed we probably would never have been any the wiser."

"Those women would have been either sadder or wiser—or both," Yost remarked bitterly. "Damn it to hell, why must they expose themselves to such things? It's enough to drive a man mad."

"Cheer up, captain," Mazie regarded him placidly. "You'll be relieved one of these days and your worries will be over."

"I don't want any relief but the relief of knowing I'm not going to find you two missing or dead some morning. Damn it, I have women of my own at home. War is a man's game—women should stay home and roll bandages or work in the hospitals."

"Applesauce!" Mazie banged the skillet down and went to one end of the counter with her bacon and coffee. "You strong, silent soldier-men make me sick," she said scornfully and ignoring Yost's glare, began to eat.

Behind Yost's back Hargrave chuckled and winked at Bailey.

"I hear there's a Battalion of Death in Russia, Mazie," he said. "Why don't you and Emmy join up?"

"Because we aren't Russians," Mazie retorted. "But if the women of Russia had been at Tannenberg you doughty soldiers wouldn't be talking so much about Hindenburg's reputation and genius for fortified trench systems."

"Atta girl, Mazie," Bailey laughed.

"Hindenburg fortified this town," said Hargrave, "and when it was finished, the French took it and now it's ours; a safer stronghold no militant female could ask for."

"Fiddle-faddle," said Mazie.

"I suppose we'll be strafed before daylight, captain?" Bailey questioned casually.

"I suppose so. We've had a dose of it every morning for a week."

"It would be a nice morning for a surprise attack," Bailey hazarded.

Yost's gaze sharpened on him.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"It's pretty damp outside. There's fog in the air. I suppose it's mist from those damned swamps."

"Not much chance, I should say," Yost decided, easing a little. "This town is well fortified—we have plenty of troops for all ordinary purposes."

"Surprise," Bailey went on musingly. "A strong attack; say a thousand men—storm troops—suddenly breaking out of a fog bank would just about scuttle our front line, wouldn't it?"

"Pardon me, Bailey," Yost protested frostily. "But don't you think you are taking too much for granted? There are commissioned officers here who are quite alert and capable."

"I'm sorry, sir. I spoke out of turn, I guess."

"Well, no matter," Yost patted his shoulder paternally. "We all get ideas sometimes—forget it."

Bailey stiffened under the older man's touch. And yet, knowing him for a spy and a traitor, he was strangely touched by the man's consummate coolness and poise.

Outside, a sudden whistling shriek culminated in a ripping blast that shook the canteen.

Yost looked at his wrist watch.

"Well," he sighed. "I guess the ball has opened."

"How long will it last?" Bailey asked, setting his back against the counter.

"Forty-five minutes—an hour at the most. It will end as soon as there is enough light to see."

The canteen door opened behind them and a soldier-runner appeared. Saluting smartly, he said:

"Message from Captain Mullen, just come in over the telephone, sir. He says it don't look good out front. The fog is the heaviest he's ever seen; and he has ordered his men to stand-to. He said to tell you he feels an attack in his bones; and will you please prepare to support him?"

"Thank you."

The orderly went out.

"Attack in his bones," Yost grumbled sourly. "A fine reason for turning men out almost an hour before stand-to."

"What are you going to do, sir?" Hargrave was tense.

"Nothing," Yost's tone was decisive. "Mullen is panicky, and I have no intention of following his lead."

"There's nothing wrong with Mr. Hindenburg's artillery," Bailey drawled, as a series of heavy explosions thundered outside. "It might just be that he has an odd thousand—"

"Hold your tongue, Bailey," Yost snapped.

"But we ought to be ready in case Captain Mullen is right," Hargrave protested.

"I'll make my own decisions, lieutenant."

Hargrave bowed stiffly.

From the curtained rear of the room Emmy emerged, looking quite fresh.

"Good morning, boys," she said cheerily. "What's this about an attack?"

"Nothing," Yost barked gruffly.

Emmy tipped the end of her nose up with a horizontal forefinger, sniffed, and marched over to the grate.

The racket outside had reached a crescendo of madness that shrieked and whistled and shook the earth as though a thousand giants danced on their heels to the demoniac shrieks of their mad women folk.

Inside, Emmy banged the skillet with a resounding clang.

Yost scowled at her, then buried his face in his coffee cup.

The door slammed open again. This

time to admit a wild eyed youngster who swallowed spasmodically from fright and exertion.

"Well—well, what is it?" Yost demanded impatiently.

"The Cap—Captain Mullen—boches—krauts—they're everywhere."

Yost grasped the soldier's arm and shook him.

"Talk sensibly," he growled.

"Yes—sir," the boy pulled himself together and rattled off his message.

"Captain Mullen reports he is attacked by a large force of enemy infantry. He wishes re-inforcements. He say he will hold on as long as possible and then fall back on you. That's all, sir."

"Get out!" Yost thrust the boy toward the door.

THE staccato rattle of machine guns and the bark of rifle fire could be plainly heard through the open door.

Yost slammed it shut.

"Shall I turn the men out, sir?" Hargrave's incisive tone disclosed the crisis. He half pivoted away from the counter to face his superior with his back to the door and his face taut with deadly anticipation.

Bailey had drawn back as Yost thrust the messenger through the door and now stood facing along the bar with his left elbow resting on it and his right thumb hooked into his belt above the butt of his holstered pistol.

Yost's glance darted from Hargrave to Bailey and back to Hargrave.

"What is it, captain—yes or no?" Hargrave's voice cracked.

Mazie, her bacon-laden fork arrested in mid-air, stared, and Emmy, turning swiftly as Hargrave's tone bit into her consciousness, stood motionless with the smoking skillet in her hand.

The silence reeked of violence. Explosion was in the air.

Yost's eyes swept the two men in bitter desperation.

Then the hand which had been reposing in the side pocket of his tunic snapped clear, and a blunt, wicked looking small caliber pistol menaced them.

"Stand fast—all of you!" Yost rasped.

Hargrave dived at him, but Yost sprang aside and the gun whacked. Bailey pulled his gun free and would have fallen pierced through and through had not Emmy with fighting Irish promptness scaled the skillet at Yost. It caromed off his shoulder, showering him with hot grease and deflecting his aim. Yost instantly fired once toward Emmy and sent his next shot through the side of Bailey's breeches. Then Bailey's gun went into action and the terrific force of a forty-five caliber slug taking Yost full in the chest flung him over backward against the concrete floor.

Bailey pounced on him, tearing the small pistol from his hand. But Yost was beyond all that. He lay limp, unconscious and choking while his face turned pale, then ashen beneath his tan.

"Look after Hargrave, Mazie," Bailey rasped as he slipped Yost's regulation forty-five caliber pistol from its holster and ran his hands over Yost's body for other weapons. This done, he stood erect and as his head cleared the top of the counter he leaned sharply forward and gasped.

"Mazie! Mazie!" he cried. "Emmy's hit."

Mazie screamed once as she turned and saw Emmy's crumpled figure lying by the stove.

"Look after her," Bailey snapped. He slapped Mazie's face sharply and when her expression of shocked surprise darkened into anger, snarled, "Look after Emmy." And knelt by Hargrave. As he did so, Hargrave groaned and sat up. Blood streamed from a wound that furrowed the side of his head.

"Yost is out," Bailey said. "How do you feel?"

"Huh?—oh—okay, I guess," Hargrave muttered confusedly and struggled to

rise. Standing erect, he said, suddenly, "Yost must have shot me."

"He did," Bailey snapped. "Snap into it, lieutenant, the front line positions are yelling for help."

"That's right. That's right!" Hargrave exclaimed, brightening, then full intelligence flooding his shocked brain glowed in his eyes. "Good work, Bailey," he cried. "I thought I had him, but it took you to bring him into the open."

"What do you mean?" Bailey snapped.

Hargrave fished up a token from his pocket and tossed it onto the counter.

"I'm from Army Intelligence Section. General Headquarters," he said. "I didn't know that another under cover operator had been sent in, but I suspected it when you went back to look for empty cartridges at the church. I picked up the missing ones while the guard was holding you outside."

"That's rich," Bailey grinned. "I thought this was a one man job. Any orders, sir?"

"Stay here. Don't let that bird Yost out of your hands. He knows too much, understand?" He gestured significantly. "I'll get a dressing later."

"Right, sir."

"Okay. I'll get relief to Mullen. So long, sergeant."

"Good luck."

Hargrave snatched the door wide and was gone.

THE bloody tide of battle washed up to the cross-patterned and twisting entanglements that protected the outer trench system of Raulincourt, where remnants of Mullen's heroic force, reinforced by troops from the town, made a final desperate stand. And it was here that the battle was won, for the attacking German force, large and determined as it was, could not stand before the withering cross-fire of cunningly placed machine guns and the devastating havoc of a brace of seventy-fives, which, lying silent many weeks in anticipation of such an opportunity, now tore the German ranks with a high-speed barrage of shrapnel.

The thin stubborn line, mired to their knees in the semi-flooded trenches, held the greater force attacking it fixed in place under the guns of the town. Six times the German ranks surged forward and six times it was pinioned by the defenders while the terrible cross-fire from the fortified emplacements chopped it to bits.

The sun was a brazen disc half way down the western sky before Hargrave came back to the canteen. Mud-smeared and tattered, he came in tucking the dirty ends of a blood-smeared first-aid dressing under his helmet.

A few seconds behind him Bailey entered. His left arm was supported in a canvas waist-belt looped around his neck and what remained of his clothes were crusted in yellow mud.

Seeing Hargrave, he limped forward.

"Yost was dying," he explained, "and it looked to me like an extra hand out there might be useful."

Without speaking, Mazie poured coffee into cups for them.

"You'd better make lots of coffee, Mazie," Hargrave suggested. "There'll be lots of customers as soon as things get a little quieter."

"Are there many—many hurt?" Mazie raised tragic eyes to Bailey's face.

"Plenty," he said brusquely. "How's Emmy?"

Mazie stiffened her chin and when she spoke her voice was calm.

"Doc says she'll pull through. He can't say much for Captain Yost's chances."

"Chest wound," said Bailey. "It's his lungs, eh?"

"Yes."

"Too bad," said Hargrave coldly. "I hoped to get something important out of him."

Mazie laughed shortly.

"The man is dying," she said bitterly.

"Why don't you let him die in peace?"

"Sympathetic," Hargrave mused. "Don't forget, Mazie, that Yost tried to do us all in."

"He's back there with Emmy." Mazie waved her hand wearily.

Behind the curtain Emmy turned bright eyes upon them.

"How're you making it, Emmy?" Bailey leaned over her.

Hargrave stood looking down on the damp gray face of Captain Yost.

"I'll be up in a week, the doctor says," Emmy bobbed her head vigorously. "The bullet didn't no more than graze me. That poor man." She went on looking toward Yost. "Sure, the idea of shooting a woman is driving him crazy. He's not conscious much, but every once in a while he wakes and starts in again."

Hargrave put his hand against Yost's forehead and as he did so Yost groaned and rolled his head restlessly from side to side.

Then, quite suddenly, his eyes opened.

"Emmy?" he said. "Emmy?"

"'T is all right, captain," she hastened to remark, nodding significantly toward Hargrave and Bailey.

"You'll be all right, Emmy?" he whispered distantly, as if reciting a story learned by note. "I didn't stop to think. I wanted you women to get out. I don't make war on women. You believe me, Emmy? They say bad things about us Germans—we—"

"Hello, Yost," said Hargrave.

Yost's voice abruptly ceased and his eyes closed.

When he opened them they were calm and heavy with pain.

"Hargrave," he said hoarsely. "Good day, sir."

"I must ask you some questions," Hargrave said not unkindly.

"Questions?" a ghastly smile flitted across Yost's pain wracked features. "Of course," he enunciated with difficulty. "Military Intelligence, aren't you? You and Bailey." He sighed and his eyes closed wearily. "Well, I'll tell you one or two things—questions are worthless—and time is short." The faintly, sardonic smile contracted his ashen face again. "I am Major Heinrich von Reitzheim, of the Imperial German Army. Engineer Department." He paused, drawing a careful and painful breath. "I am a military engineer—an expert on fortifications. I designed and built all this," he raised a pale finger toward the wall. "All the works in Raulincourt—are my work. And they are good—*nein?*"

"What was your mission here?" Hargrave demanded.

"Recapture of the town. We wanted these fortifications reduced—they are too strong when held by an enemy—" his head drooped and with a mighty effort he held it erect—"I volunteered," he said proudly, "to recapture and destroy my own work."

A froth of bloody foam stained his livid lips and Hargrave wiped it away.

"Thank you," Reitzheim murmured.

"You have been to America," Hargrave stated.

"Through many years—I have dear friends—but when war comes—a soldier—" he paused and his eyelids drooped.

"How did you get yourself placed in the American Army?" was Hargrave's next question.

"There are—many—many paths to a—a cherished goal," Reitzheim said with difficulty. A spasm of pain seized him and when it had passed he spoke firmly with wide open eyes. "I have had an honorable career," he said. "I am a soldier." His head sank forward and his words were muffled, but distinct. "No craven jackal warring on—women. Bailey," he whispered after a pause. "Bailey—Colton's man—he is shrewd—watch him—a hound after a fox—there's luck in his eyes." His fingers tightened, gripping the blanket which covered him, and he lifted his head. A

great sadness lay heavy on his dying face. "The dark finger—" he murmured painfully. "Fate—we are—we—" His voice trailed off and as his body slumped, a heavy sweat beaded his face.

"Poor man," said Emmy from her pallet. "I suppose Mazie and me are to be sent away now?" she queried.

"'Fraid so. You, anyway," Hargrave smiled. "You're great people—you and Mazie. It's too bad you can't do your job in your own way—keep your own stature—and even die if you must on your own terms; but in this war nobody is great; we are all small cogs in a machine that's too big and complicated, it overshadows everything." Hargrave frowned. "I'll have you moved after dark tonight," he promised briskly. "If you like, Mazie can go along in the ambulance with you. You had better go back, too, Bailey. You're bunged up pretty badly. I'll stay and handle our relief when it comes."

"Suits me!" said Bailey. "I could do with a square meal, and some shut-eye."

"Make your own report," said Hargrave. "You turned the trick—I'll give you a puff in mine."

"Thanks," Bailey grinned. "Well, so long, sir. By, Emmy. See you back at Division Headquarters, Mazie," he said, taking her hand. "Maybe we could take a walk or something while my lame arm heals. Bet?"

"All—all right, I guess," Mazie smiled mistily.

SERGEANT BILL BAILEY limped along the mud-rutted road. The sun burned white hot above a thin haze. On his left a ten-foot wire net festooned with bunches of painted burlap screened the road from prying eyes buried in the slopes of Mont Sec. Ahead of him, a flaming bombardment was blasting the roofs of Beaumont to smithereens.

Thinking of Mazie, Bailey watched it for a moment.

"If I can get by that and weather the graveyard at Dead Man's Curve," he muttered, "then I'll only have Mandre' to worry about."

He hitched his pack a little higher between his shoulders and limped hopefully towards the flame.

Robert E. Pinkerton introduces a new character in the next issue—Just Another Jones. Read about this chap with the odd name on page 127.

He rose, paced back and forth across the hole, shaking his fist at the bolted doors and muttering imprecations, cursing the Germans for their stupidity, flaying himself for his own folly in coming to Berlin.

PART TWO

SECRET AGENT B-7

By ARED WHITE

"CAPTAIN," said Colonel Rand to the young Intelligence officer, "this document was handed to me a few minutes ago by Marshal Foch himself. It tells the story of Pablo Pozas. He was a deserter from the American Army who joined up with the Mexicans and became a Major. On the way from Mexico City to Berlin on a secret mission he was arrested by the French secret service.

"As you know," the colonel seemed to change the subject, "the Allied command is extremely anxious to discover the state of mind of the people of Germany. The winning of the war depends on it. Here is our opportunity. You will cease to be Captain Fox Elton. You will become Major Pablo Pozas. With his credentials you will proceed to Berlin, there to use your eyes and ears—and to get back as best you can. If you succeed, you will be decorated with the military cross of every Allied nation."

"And if I don't succeed," said Fox Elton, "with the German wooden cross."

Elton's first step was to interview Pozas and from him learn the meeting

place of German spies in Paris. It was the flower shop of M. Gobert and there some days later Elton sat across the table from the Prussian agent von Blauzwirn and heard him tell the answer to a riddle that had been puzzling the Allied Intelligence services for days.

"Why is Germany anxious to wipe out the mysterious Zumbusch and his friend, the beautiful Babu? We know that he had sworn to kill the King of England and the President of France, but we know also that he is the agent of wealthy and powerful forces that hope to seize and rule all of Europe while it is in the throes of war. Therefore, it is to the interest of Germany to see that he is killed just as much as to the interest of the United States, for I perceive," said the Prussian, rising, "that you are not Major Pozas but an American agent. Kindly permit me to withdraw."

As Elton drew his pistol and the two came to grips, French secret police, headed by Elton's friend d'Auteuil, broke down the door and Elton was free to proceed into Germany.

Going by way of Switzerland he thought he successfully passed test after test, beginning with the scrutiny of Colonel Sixt von Esch and the attache Dittmar in Lausanne, and ending with that of Herr Major von Keukle in Berlin itself. There he was shown about the city by Herr Staubenwasser of the Imperial Intelligence service and it took but a brief time to learn that the spirit of the German people was about to break. Elton was returning to his hotel to plan his return to Paris when a Prussian stepped in his way.

"Excuse me, Herr Pozas," said his harsh voice in excellent English, "but this hotel is reserved for loyal Germans. If you come with me I will show you the place we have prepared for Yankee spies."

CHAPTER XI

THE THREAT OF ZUMBUSCH

ELTON eyed his captor with cool amusement. He permitted himself no instant's thought upon the possibility of resistance or escape. Even if he had only one man to deal with instead of the half dozen who quickly closed about him, he realized the impossibility of getting out of Berlin once the alarm had been sounded. The whole force of the German secret service would be centered promptly and no conceivable miracle of flight could save him.

"I presume I must let your superiors explain to you your ridiculous blunder," he said with a caustic smile. "It will be well worth the annoyance to hear your apologies for this stupidity."

The German agent laughed disagreeably at Elton's easy pretense.

"It will be worth this insolence of yours," he retorted, "to hear your story to our court martial—and see how well you behave with your back to a German wall!"

Elton's captors motioned back the gawking crowd that was gathered in front of the Wilhelmshof and hustled him to a large sedan, into which three of them crowded while the others rode the running boards. He caught the muttered order to the chauffeur as the car moved off from the curb. Koenigergratzerstrasse 70. The number jolted him. If he had thought this some coup of the Berlin police, he knew now that he was being taken to headquarters of the Imperial Navy's Intelligence service.

But he relaxed into the perfect composure that steel nerves afforded him in moments of critical danger. If the

tentacles of the Prussian secret service had penetrated his masquerade, he knew nothing could save him. There was nothing of fatalism in Elton's makeup, but he had prepared himself for the loser's lot in this gamble with death. If the Imperial secret service had won the toss at last, he knew he could face their muskets without a show of himself.

The reception at headquarters was a disconcerting confirmation of the worst. Instead of the board of trained interrogators he expected, the prisoner was met by a taciturn man in a commander's uniform who disposed of Elton with a blunt finality.

"This is the American spy, Herr Lieutenant?" he said to the arresting officer while glaring at Elton. "Very well, the case against him is too complete to waste our time on questions. Place him in a cell until morning when a court will dispose of the case!"

Elton was bustled without formality into a small cell several flights down under the building, a cell of double steel doors and triple bolts. Although escape from such a steel cage was humanly impossible, the added precaution was taken of two armed sailors posted in the corridor flanking each side of the hole.

Elton's humor, as he sat down on a narrow iron bed, was one of grim acceptance, a smile of resignation at the trick of fate that had landed him finally in the Imperial spy net. But he did not forget that his role was Pozas, that Pozas would not smile. And Elton's alert eyes caught the one incongruous rift in the Imperial assurance—the large incandescent overhead that flooded the cell with light.

His face gathered in a scowl. He rose, paced back and forth across the hole, shaking his fist at the bolted doors and muttering imprecations, cursing the Germans for their stupidity, flaying himself for his own folly for coming to Berlin. That bright light in his cell was not there without good reason. An ordinary light would suffice to warn the sentries of any attempt at self-destruction, if that had been the German intent. Therefore, the light must mean that he was held under expert observation from some hidden point of vantage. A flagrant inconsistency against the German boast of a completed case against him.

AS IF on an impulse of disgust Elton finally threw himself on the cot and turned his mind to a night's sleep. There was nothing to be gained, he argued, by a night of mulling. Either the Germans had him securely trapped or they didn't. Sleep would be the best preparation for the ordeal he must face tomorrow.

The clank of steel bolts woke him. He estimated that he had little more than fallen asleep before this intervention. The sentries motioned him out of the cell and started him up the flights that led out of the hole. His awakening brought a new vestige of hope, a glimmer of confirmation of the meaning of that bright incandescent. His observers, having seen him asleep, were calling him now for examination. But he did not allow himself too great an optimism. It might be that a court martial had been convened, that he was about to see the sun for the last time as it rose in the morning over Berlin.

A lone officer was waiting for him, an elderly Naval file of the rank of Kapitan, heavy red jowls and thick fat neck cascaded over the edges of a high collar, his beet-red face cast in lines of brooding malevolence.

"I will be brief," the captain announced in a thick, blunt voice as Elton was placed in front of him. "We have the complete information of your services as an American spy. Of that I have no need to question you. The penalty is death. But—under certain conditions, it may be possible to offer you imprisonment in the Fortress of Glatz in Upper Silesia."

Elton returned the fellow's glare, his mouth twisting in contempt.

"If the word of your attachés is worthless—why should I want to make a bargain with you, even if I knew what you are talking about!" he rejoined.

"*Himmel,* but you shall not talk to me with any such insolence!" the Kapitan exploded, whacking the desk with his chubby fist. "But our agent at Mexico City has discovered the mistake and so cabled us!"

"I have your word for that," Elton said tartly.

"*Ja,* and you have my word that I will not waste more good patience on your impertinence! Come, a last chance! Do you wish to speak sensibly?"

"What is it you have to say?"

"A little information which we wish." The Herr Kapitan's eyes brightened with anticipation, he rolled his hands together and his voice became softly persuasive. "The American secret service have got you into this hole. There is only one way to get yourself out—and that is the truth on what I have to ask. More than anything else you must tell us the truth of how much longer the Allies can hold out against our attacks. How much—"

"I demand to know the reason for this charge you make against me!" Elton cut in sharply.

"*Ach, Gott,* but you try my patience!" the Herr Kapitan fretted. "But since you know you are an American spy, must I convince you also that I know? Very well, Señor Pozas. *Himmel,* what a name! We know as well as you do that you are McCloud, an American secret agent sent to Mexico City to work your way into German confidence with Mexican connivance. *Ach,* but there is no detail of your clumsy game that we do not understand—from the hour of your birth to your arrival in London where you conferred with your American agents!"

Elton managed to conceal the leap of his pulse, the glorious realization that he faced not a German court martial but another trick of the Imperial secret service. The happy omen of that incandescent in his cell was wholly confirmed.

"Herr Kapitan," Elton replied in a level voice, "is it not conceivable to you that a man might abandon his own country, after its officers had goaded him beyond the limit of his endurance? And having once deserted, is he not compelled to make a new existence for himself? If you are not capable of understanding that—then you are a fool, and I have nothing more to say to you!"

"*Dunder und blitzen!*" The Herr Kapitan's detonation was instant. He hammered the table, at the point of apoplexy, and yelled for the guard. "Take this impudent blackguard away!" he roared. "He has insulted me! Put him back in his cell and keep him there! I will have him shot at sunrise—out with him!"

Back in his cell, Elton masked under a scowl the smile of fortune that again illumined his horizon. The Herr Kapitan's story of McCloud had told him instantly that his masquerade was safe. It meant that the Germans suspected Pozas, but had no hint of Elton. And as Pozas, he knew that he had won, the Herr Kapitan's outburst nothing more than empty spleen that had served the excellent purpose, at least, of terminating a dangerous interview.

Since the hour was short of midnight, he turned back to the cot with an easy mind and slept soundly. In the morning he was awakened by a sentry who took him upstairs to a junior officer of the Imperial Army. If Elton held any uncertainties of what was to occur next, they were dissolved by the courteous salute in which the officer took him in charge. A salute under no circumstances would be extended to a suspected spy. A staff car whisked them to Wilhelmstrasse. Major von Keukle received him at once.

"I apologize for the stupidity of our Navy," the Herr Major exclaimed. "*Ach,* but that *dummox* who arrested you did not consult us, nor even so much as notify the Berlin secret police! I hope you were not put to too much inconvenience, my friend."

"I'm rather used to misunderstandings and suspicions," Elton replied, with a smile that said he would forget the incident. "Such things are more or less bound to happen at such a critical time in a great war, Herr Major."

"*Ja,* you are very gracious, my friend," said von Keukle. He motioned Elton to a seat and offered him a cigaret. "But I have pleasant news that perhaps will remove the bad taste from your mouth. Did not our agent promise that you were to receive five hundred marks monthly for your services?"

"I believe that was the amount which he wrote down in the letter containing secret credentials, Herr Major."

"We will increase that to six hundred marks, Major Pozas. What is more, we will pay you a bonus of—ten thousand marks, if you are successful in what we have for you."

"That is very generous, indeed, if it is anything within my humble abilities."

"You are very modest, my friend. But we are not deceived as to your resourcefulness. The work will not be very dangerous with the excellent credentials you carry, which already have passed the vise of British and French. You—you have heard of Herr Zumbusch?"

"Not coherently, Herr Major. I would prefer that you tell me of him yourself."

"*Ja.* It is not a pleasant picture, my friend. Zumbusch is Austrian, and trained in the political service of Austria and Germany. But in Russia, and out of his own devilish genius, he has learned a power of concealment and mischief that makes him the most dangerous fiend alive today. Even does he succeed in having Russia report his death by execution—before setting about his present mischief."

"Very interesting, Herr Major. But the nature of his danger?"

Von Keukle leaned across his desk and spoke through taut lips.

"He has threatened to murder certain Allied leaders—which does not matter, Major Pozas. But we have reasons to suspect he intends to murder the Emperor. *Ja,* the Emperor and the field marshals, von Hindenburg and von Ludendorff. That—would be a calamity to shake the world, and in the present hour, for reasons I will not explain, destroy Imperial Germany!"

Elton's wide eyes reflected incredulity as he stared down at von Keukle.

"But the threats of a madman need come to nothing," he argued. "Surely, your important leaders are carefully enough guarded against any such attempt as that."

Von Keukle gave a bitter laugh.

"*Ach, Gott,* but you do not know the genius of this fanatic Zumbusch! Nor the shadowy jackals of hell who dog his heels. No, not even his boast that he will rule Austria one day turns them from him. Those who follow him are dangerous agitators, skulkers, jackals of the shady places, nor do they turn away from him even when he drives his knife into the breast of one of them who has aroused his suspicions!"

"Such a man," said Elton with a whimsical smile when he saw that von Keukle meant to deal no further in details, "would find an excellent field of usefulness in Mexico. Please, what is it you wish of me?"

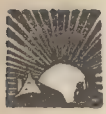
The Herr Major got up and smiled.

"First of all, my friend, you must have your breakfast. Until six o'clock there will be nothing. At that hour Herr Staubenwasser will call to take you to dinner. *Ja,* and with you will dine the very charming Fraulein Gobbin of—Vienna. From Herr Staubenwasser you will learn what it is we wish. A pleasant

journey, my friend, and when you return to Berlin—I hope for the pleasure of giving you a check in the sum of ten thousand marks. *Auf wiedersehen.*"

CHAPTER XII

THE UNEXPECTED SEÑORA POZAS



THE early morning sun slanting over the roofs and steeples of Berlin as he emerged into Wilhelmstrasse struck Elton with a new exhilaration. After his night of suppressed uncertainties there was a delicious vitality in the soft breeze in the lime trees, the hum of traffic, the very sense of human existence.

He shook his shoulders, with the relieved tension of a gambler who had risked everything on a throw of the dice—and won. The whole day lay before him, and Berlin. But he had no taste for further brash risks. No matter how fully it might have accepted him, the Imperial secret service was a thing of endless suspicions. Another day of prying about would have to be conducted with the greatest discretion. He must cling closer than ever to the role of Pozas, bent on sight-seeing. The German shadows would not be slow in checking on a man who haunted the industrial districts, the Reichstag, the shops and the arsenal districts, bent on what could be construed only as political information of a dangerous character in these hours of internal crisis.

Band music caught his ears again as he came to Unter den Linden. But this was not an improvised band. He waited for the procession, a regiment in field uniform headed by its band. Young soldiers, too, steel helmeted, fully equipped for the field, marching with fixed bayonets, the black and gold of the Imperial colors and blue, white and gilt of regimental standard flashing in the sun in their van.

Behind the soldiers were automobiles filled with young women and decorated with placards.

"All loyal Germans will fight on for victory."

"Germany shall not be devoured by the wolves."

"Shall we stab our soldiers in the back while they fight for victory?"

"Is treason the reward of those who have died for the Fatherland?"

"God has promised us victory, but we must stand firm!"

It was such a spectacle as he had seen a hundred times down Broadway, an appeal to the fighting spirit, a maneuver to arouse enthusiasm for this grim adventure of war. Elton watched not the passing soldiers but the people who flocked to the curb. The sullen lines, the haggard cast, seemed to lift from the massed faces of onlookers. Elton saw the brightening of eyes, the lifting of hats of old men, tears of patriotism glistening from the faces of women, most of them women in stark black. So the spectacle was not an armed threat to disturbers in Berlin, but an appeal to the emotions of the long-suffering whose patience and loyalty was lagging.

But there were those who refused to be moved. Elton saw them moving doggedly along, eyes fixed straight ahead of them, rejecting the appeal, impervious to the martial toxin. These were minority, but enough of them to confirm the stubborn quality of war-weariness that threatened the field marshals and their endless campaign of blood-letting. Such a manifestation of indifference would have been swiftly resented in New York. Elton remembered. Patriots of the curb would have knocked those reluctant hats into the gutters if they were not removed to the passing National colors.

He went to his hotel for breakfast, to find that even the imposing Wilhelmshof was on short rations. By liberal bribery of the head waiter Elton got one clandestine egg, a tiny sausage and

one thin slice of hamstered bread. A lean meal but a satisfying portent.

After breakfast he took a brisk walk and returned to his room to spend the day. The Imperial shadows should be well satisfied with a man who devoted precious daylight hours to sleep. As for further observations in Berlin, Elton's mind was made up, a hundred incidents cementing his certainty. Not only were the field marshals astride a powder keg but the fuse was short and highly inflammable. And if the Allied statesmen had suspected German propaganda in these amazing reports of disaffection that leaked through from neutral sources, they would promptly accept confirmation through the trained eyes of a loyal Allied agent. Through the day, Elton occupied his mind with his one remaining problem—means and methods of prompt escape.

If he had built a strong hope, out of von Keukle's words, that evening might bring the new German movement against Zumbusch and his own great chance of reaching the frontiers, sight of the punctual Herr Staubenwasser struck him with acute disappointment. Staubenwasser arrived in evening clothes and, as they entered a cab, ordered the driver to a café in the Tiergarten. After dinner, Staubenwasser announced, they would spend the evening at a popular burlesque.

Staubenwasser's maneuver was as mystifying as the fellow's restrained hospitality, neither fitting into any consistent pattern. The Prussian agent not only accepted Elton with reservations, but Elton found himself unable to fathom the precise nature of those reservations. Whether Staubenwasser, a person of the German military caste, merely suffered repugnance in his enforced association with this adventurer from Mexico, or harbored some secret suspicions, remained to be seen.

At the Tiergarten café Staubenwasser had reserved a private dining room, the table decorated in fall flowers as for a formal dinner party, covers laid for seven. But as dinner was served no other guest appeared, and Staubenwasser offered no explanation of the vacant places, nor mention of the Fraulein Gobbin of von Keukle's cryptic reference. Through the dinner, Staubenwasser remained the attentive host, speaking in polite abstractions, seeing that Elton's glasses were kept filled, his wants served promptly. And if the cafés had lean larders, Staubenwasser was not compelled to stint.

"Presently we shall have champagne of a very fine vintage," Staubenwasser said, when they had finished dinner. "I have invited five persons to join us for a few moments. A sixth guest will come afterwards whom I wish particularly to present to you."

There was an indefinable amusement in Staubenwasser's eyes as he said this. Through the gray haze from his cigar the Prussian agent was observing Elton, his eyes half closed, apparently without interest or design, but Elton caught the searching glitter in their depths, though Staubenwasser's face remained a mask of polite reserve and mildly superior aloofness.

"May I presume, Major Pozas, to make a purely personal observation?" he said next. "It is the rather extraordinary relationship that circumstances bring upon us that prompts me to say what I have in mind."

"Of course, Herr Staubenwasser," Elton replied. "I hope you will feel free to say whatever you wish."

"It is this, major. I estimate you to be a gentleman of the highest principles and sense of honor."

"Thank you," said Elton, embarrassed by the compliment and wondering what Staubenwasser was up to. "I have always prided myself on those qualities."

"Also a gentleman of unusual intelligence, major. Capable of independent thought and action in a great crisis, once

convinced you were acting honorably in the best interests of a great cause."

"You embarrass me, Herr Staubenwasser. I can only hope your estimate of my intelligence is not too far wrong."

"I hope that you will pardon such purely personal remarks, major," Staubenwasser dismissed the subject. "But we must learn to speak frankly with each other at times." He glanced at his watch and rang for the waiter, adding, "But our friends will arrive in a moment."

As if moving in perfect coordination with Herr Staubenwasser's wristwatch five men came into the room a moment later, arranged themselves in a row and bowed in unison. Staubenwasser rose, stiffly returned their bow and introduced them to Elton by a terse mention of their names. Rascha, Jukow, Savinoff, Zastrov, Zeitz. Each dipped his head, the quick duck of a wooden automaton. The five were of a size, well knit young men of medium stature, faces as wooden as their manner, three of them plainly Russian, two evidently German.

Three waiters filed in behind them and began pouring champagne. Herr Staubenwasser sat down first, then motioned them to a seat at the table. They were no sooner seated than he rose and lifted his glass. The five were instantly on their feet.

"We are all comrades together," said Staubenwasser in a soft voice, looking among them with an easy condescension. "I have had this excellent champagne brought from St. Peterburg, where it has mellowed in the cellars of the Czar. What finer than with such a glorious wine we should drink a toast together as friends and comrades in our great undertaking." He lifted the glass high. "A toast to our success. To our revenge—the death of Zumbusch!"

THERE was a sharp crash of heels, a guttural exclamation, five glasses lifted as one and drained to the bottom. Staubenwasser snapped the stem and dashed his empty glass to the floor. Five glasses splintered on the floor in unison, Elton's following. The five faces remained expressionless except for the fire that blazed in every eye. At Staubenwasser's nod they faced about and left the room as unceremoniously as they had entered.

"Swine!" Staubenwasser sneered as their footsteps faded in the hallway. He smiled cynically and shrugged as if to rid himself of his contempt as he added, "But I presume that does not matter under the—circumstances."

"Russians?" Elton prompted when he saw that Staubenwasser intended no elucidation.

"Three Russians," Staubenwasser replied without hesitation. "Rascha, Savinoff and Zastrov. Zeitz is German, I'm told, and Jukow an Austrian. All mercenaries—agents of the late Czar's Okhrana, and therefore a conscienceless crew of rascals. But I trust them fully since the pursestrings will remain behind in Berlin. Collect on delivery. And the souls of such children will burn for months on that Czarist champagne—which was really ordinary German champagne. Imagination plays strange pranks with us, does it not, Major Pozas?"

"If we permit," said Elton, smiling.

"You mean you are impervious to images?" Staubenwasser challenged.

"Well, yes, Herr Staubenwasser. A soldier must learn that too much imagination is not good for his nerves, when his work is—dangerous."

Staubenwasser smiled in some dubious amusement of his own.

"We shall see," he rejoined. "My own opinion is that imagination is a very fickle thing, which we can never wholly trust. But"—he smiled again—"we shall see. In any event I must not

forget to tell you that there are six of these rascals—the sixth of them a peculiarly sinister and slippery rogue, even though I do have reason for my own implicit confidence in his loyalty."

"Why do you refer to that?" Elton asked frankly.

The Prussian rang for a waiter and with a contemptuous toss of his hand ordered the champagne bottles removed. He offered Elton a fresh cigar and lighted his own.

"I shall answer your question, Señor Pozas," he said, quite as if there had been no interruption, "the day after tomorrow at about this hour."

The waiter came in with another bottle of champagne, opened it and filled the two glasses. Staubenwasser scowled at his watch.

"Fraulein Gobbin is supposed to be subject to my exact orders," he said irritably, and a moment later chuckled good humoredly. "But she is far too clever a woman to arrive on time at a social occasion."

"Our sixth guest," said Elton.

"Our seventh," Staubenwasser corrected. His insinuating smile of a few moments before recurred. "There was one I imagine you did not notice. The sixth of our Russian police. But I am certain you will like the *fraulein*. She is an amazingly clever woman despite her good looks. Not the usual female agent, Pozas, but an unusual one whom we have trained recently for a specific mission. Intuitions of a woman, brains of a man, courage of a soldier. A remarkable combination of virtues, is it not?"

"A paragon, I'd say. She is German, of course?"

"Danish—and Viennese, but not the blond Viennese, and I am told there is a Spanish strain in her family, which is fortunate. Lately we have been at very great pains to develop that fact, which may prove very fortunate—though I hope not."

"I trust you do not expect me to understand fully everything you say, Herr Staubenwasser."

"Perhaps not at the moment. But before too long. I think I hear our tardy guest pattering in. I didn't think she'd keep us waiting too long."

Staubenwasser hurried to the door and opened it with a cordial greeting to a young woman in a plain traveling dress. He took the silver fox stole which she removed from about her neck, presented her formally to Elton and placed a chair for her at the table.

"I intended to reprimand you for keeping us waiting," he said with mock severity. "But you are so charming tonight that I simply can't remember all the disagreeable things I intended to say."

"Which is only your way of letting me know that your champagne has not waited," she rejoined with a reserved flash of even white teeth. "Evidently you forget that it takes more than a few minutes to get ready for leaving Berlin, Herr Staubenwasser."

"I'd forgotten, dear lady, that your wedding trousseau had to be put in order," Staubenwasser laughed. "I humbly apologize for being so utterly unreasonable."

Fraulein flushed at this reference and hid a slight embarrassment in a sip of wine. Elton had taken the opportunity of her exchange with Staubenwasser to observe her carefully. Not the conventional type of secret service operative, he saw. Her exceptional beauty would have been of great value for diplomatic entanglements in neutral Berne and Geneva, now the world's centers of international intrigue. But there was a quality in her fine features, an intelligence and poise in her large brown eyes that told Elton Fraulein Gobbin was not of the Prussian vampire service.

"But is not Fraulein a great deal more charming than I described?" Staubenwasser demanded of Elton.

"I imagine that is no new topic to Fraulein," Elton said drily.

He had caught the young woman's mild annoyance at Staubenwasser's flattery, her manifest distaste for a continuance of such personalities. He guessed her age at something less than twenty-five. Her face was not Viennese nor Danish, he thought, but suggestive more of Spain in the fine arch of her thin brows, the limpid glow of her eyes and the olive undertone of her cheeks. And of the light chatter he had singled out that reference to her leaving Berlin, noted the simple travelling dress that hinted of early departure.

Staubenwasser filled their glasses and kept up his light chatter, which Fraulein ignored without being impolite. Elton noted the small solitaire that shone from her left hand, the slender platinum band of a wedding ring that accompanied it, and wondered what lay behind Staubenwasser's mention of her wedding trousseau.

"There are many beautiful women in Europe, but none who combine a finer intelligence with that beauty," Staubenwasser announced extravagantly. He had gotten to his feet and now lifted his glass. "Dear lady, I apologize for mentioning such a person as Babu in the same breath. But since it is with her you must concern yourself so shortly, I drink to your health and to your enemy."

Elton joined the Prussian agent in drinking bottoms up. Fraulein accepted the toast with a half smile and a curt nod. She busied herself with the contents of her purse as Staubenwasser quickly filled the glasses. The fellow turned to Elton, his eyes glittering in a vast amusement.

"And now, my friend," he said, "let us drink to the very charming Señora Pozas, whom you shall have the honor of escorting on a little wedding journey through Switzerland and France."

CHAPTER XIII

A SWISS HONEYMOON

ELTON packed his few effects together at the Wilhelmshof, settled his accounts and took a motor cab to the station in the solemn nonchalance of a man who goes about routine matters. But in the darkness of the cab as it sped through the half filled streets of Berlin, his face glowed with the hot wine of a vast success.

Switzerland was his immediate destination. Staubenwasser had told him nothing more than was revealed by the German agent's veiled patter. But Staubenwasser had given him his German authority for travel and his railway ticket, which told him his destination. Also he knew that Switzerland was merely an intermediate stop on the way to France—and Holland. Through Allied country his credentials must vouch not only for himself but for a Spanish bride, this German agent who was to cope with the shadowy Babu.

But of Fraulein Gobbin, Herr Staubenwasser, the evening's adventures, he was not thinking. Nor even of the enigmatical Zumbusch and the mysterious Babu. The midnight express out of Berlin would put him on the first leg of his victorious return to headquarters, with the precious information that might affect the whole course of human affairs.

His mind was groping already for the first words of that momentous report for Marshal Foch. The situation in Berlin is approaching a civil crisis that seriously threatens German militarist control. Sustained Allied military advances are certain to destroy Germany's remaining morale behind the lines. Berlin is sick of war to the very verge of revolt. Berlin wants peace and has lost faith in a peace by German military victory.

The high points of his summary

flashed into his mind. What a document for Allied leaders, when supported by all the details that had fallen under the skilful eyes of a trained Allied observer. It might mean that the western front would arouse itself to a new fury of death and destruction. It might mean that five million men would press forward, leaving death and destruction in their wake through the remaining weeks of 1918, the violent death of another hundred thousand, even twice or three times that number.

But might not such a crimson upheaval serve at last to destroy the Juggernaut that was slowly pounding civilization to pieces? Might not a red toll of ten thousand American lives in driving north against Sedan avert the projected mad orgy of Metz?

Elton saw that his hand trembled as he lighted a cigaret. With an effort he brought his nerves under control, composed himself against the eager pounding of his pulse. Herr Staubenwasser would be at the depot, and Fraulein Gobbin, and the five Russians. He had no need to be told that this was the new Prussian movement against Zumbusch, reenforcements for the ill-starred Herr Hauptmann von Blauzwirn, another Prussian secret service drive in which he was one of the pawns.

At the depot his passports were vised and stamped without question. Herr Staubenwasser was not on the platform, nor the others, and it was not until a train porter in uniform was placing him in a first-class compartment that he recognized the fellow. Savinoff, one of Staubenwasser's wooden-faced Russians. The Russian did not speak, neither did he take any pains to conceal his identity. As soon as he provided for Elton's comfort Savinoff left, closing the compartment door.

The sixth Russian. Sight of Savinoff brought back to Elton the words of Staubenwasser. There had been some deep significance in that pointed reference. As the train puffed out of the station and left Berlin quickly behind, Elton breathed relief. He was to have this compartment to himself, though it might have accommodated most of Staubenwasser's spy crew.

He turned in without delay. There was a busy night ahead of him, a night in which he must plot out the precise verbiage of his official report, its sequence of details and logical deductions, his own positive conclusions. And if the night was to be spent in planning, it was discreet that he do this in the guise of a man asleep. Berlin was behind him but not sharp German suspicions. A misstep now would be a thousand times a tragedy.

What, too, was in store when he reached Switzerland? Even after he passed the Allied barriers west of Geneva and took the French express from the frontier into Paris? He smiled at the dire picture. An Allied agent entering the French metropolis with a Prussian spy team trailing his heels. And just how far did Staubenwasser count upon him? Was that Prussian wholly deceived by the Pozas masquerade? And even if that were so, was not Staubenwasser the kind to take minute precautions against the unexpected?

The complications of his journey back multiplied as he reflected upon the motley crew that would be watching his every move. Even in France, Staubenwasser would not be wholly at a disadvantage, hemmed in by his adept Russian agents. Doubtless the Prussian would proceed with advanced guard, flanks and rear secured. But the scheme of trapping Staubenwasser and his crew would be certain enough at the proper time. Details must wait upon developments in Paris.

In the morning Elton's breakfast was brought in by the silent Savinoff, who came and went without a word. Elton spent the day alone, looking out at the fleeting German panorama. Their fail-

ure to appear did not disturb Elton's confidence that Staubenwasser and Fraulein Gobbin were aboard, with their four other Okhrana agents scattered in various compartments through the train. Savinoff brought lunch and dinner. A bottle of wine and bundle of cigars accompanied the evening meal.

UNTIL late evening Elton was absorbed in the weighing of words and composition of sentences so that when he reached headquarters he would need only dictate his report to a facile field clerk. Thus, a few hours after he had left the Swiss frontier behind, that report would be on its way by airplane from Chaumont to the Allied generalissimo's chateau.

Berne lay under his window when he awoke in the morning, the first flush of sunrise across the skies. Sight of the Swiss metropolis, at last a glorious reality, warmed him with a sense of release and security. There might be complications in Berne. Von Esch's agents might have gotten some hint of how things had fared with the Hauptmann von Blauzwirn in Paris. But in this game of wits with the Imperial secret service, Elton's life did not hang so lightly in the balance now that they were on neutral soil.

Savinoff, in civilian clothes, was waiting for him at the platform and took him to the Hotel Schweitzerhof on the nearby Bahnhof-Plaz. At this place he was allotted a luxurious room for two, with an alcove view of the Bernese Alps.

"Please that you wait, Herr Major, until you receive instructions," Savinoff said and departed with a servile bow.

The morning passed without incident. With early afternoon Elton ordered luncheon brought up. As the afternoon lengthened he sat looking out at the distant snow-capped peaks. Though it suited him that he remain out of sight in Berne, with that city's tangled skeins of intrigue and alert eyes, he found himself puzzled by this long frittering away of valuable hours. It might mean any one of many different things, with no straw of tangible circumstance to point at which.

By evening patience grew into restlessness and restlessness into an impulse to bolt. A stroll to the dining room, outside into a cab—and in a few minutes he could claim the sanctuary of French or American legation. There he could write his report and put it on the wires in enciphered code.

He paced the floor under this impulse, weighing it from every point of view. Such a coup would speed up his report by many hours. But would it not unmask him to the Imperial secret service, remove any chance of trapping Staubenwasser? And close for all time the tangible trail to Zumbusch.

A knock at the door ended his conflict with these uncertainties. Fraulein Gobbin came in, two flunkeys of the hotel at her heels carrying several large packages from Bernese stores.

"Dearest, I am so sorry I have been so long," she said, coming up and kissing him lightly on the forehead. "But I met an old friend of ours from Madrid—and I thought I should never get rid of her."

The servants deposited the packages and bowed themselves out. Fraulein Gobbin shrugged and sat down.

"I hope you understand," she said coolly, looking at him with impersonal eyes. "Otherwise it would be terribly embarrassing—to both of us."

"Of course," Elton assured with a genial smile. "We are merely playing a rôle and must keep up appearances. Isn't that it?"

"I presume it is no different from actors playing their little parts," she said. "Except that it is much more dangerous since we play for our lives rather than more reputation."

"But that only adds real spice to the game, Fraulein, don't you say? Play acting would seem very tame after this."

Her eyes searched his while she

weighed his voice for any ulterior impertinence that might threaten the barrier of friendly impersonality she was plainly erecting.

"I don't mind the danger," she said with a more friendly smile. "Not so long as I feel it is my duty. But"—she found difficulty framing her precise words—"it is not—well, not the easiest rôle—of traveling through enemy countries as the bride of a man I've met casually, and know next to nothing about."

"Herr Staubenwasser, I take it, has explained everything about me you wanted to know—and accepted full responsibility for my conduct."

"Herr Staubenwasser merely said that I would be safe from the French posing as your wife, Herr Pozas, while we are in France. So—since I must depend so much upon you, I hope we can be good friends."

Elton's gaze dropped to the floor. Fraulein Gobbin's subtle plea for a stout barrier of impersonal friendliness in their adventure was lost in his sudden grim realization of her dependence upon a masquerader whose duty it would be to land her in the Allied spy net. It was the first time that he had been tricked out of his easy composure. He looked up again in a moment.

"You may be sure, Fraulein, that I will think only of my official duty," he evaded, grimly composed.

"Of course, I knew I could depend on you," she replied quickly. "I credited you at first sight with a high sense of honor and a man of great common sense." She got up, an easy smile on her face, and began undoing the packages. "But now that we understand each other, we must remember that there is our part to play in the big drama. In a few minutes we are leaving Berne, Herr Pozas."

The first of the packages yielded a small traveling case into which she packed adeptly an unbelievable assortment of dresses and lingerie from the Swiss shops. When she had made ready to leave she rang for a porter.

"We will reach Geneva rather late in the night," she explained nonchalantly. "There Herr Staubenwasser will be waiting for an interview at the Bernerhof." She added with a play of excitement in her eyes, lowering her voice, "And tomorrow we will cross the Swiss frontier on our way to Paris."

"Thank you," said Elton. "It is the first I have heard of our immediate plans."

"I meant to tell you before that my name is Yola." Her white teeth flashed in a dry smile. "I mention this only because Señor Pozas should know that Señora Pozas' name is Yola—before they invade France."

"For the same reason," said Elton, "Señora Pozas should know that señor's name is listed as Pablo."

"Pablo," she repeated, and inquired in Spanish, "That is a familiar name in Spain—and is Pablo really your name, señor?"

"In any event it will serve our purposes very well," he said, having some difficulty with the slender Spanish he had picked up years before on a trip through Mexico. At seeing the perplexity in which she studied him, he added frankly, in German: "Evidently you did not know that I am neither Mexican nor Spanish—but American?"

Fraulein Gobbin's large brown eyes widened and she looked at Elton in the way of one who has been stirred by some sudden premonition of great danger.

"My nationality appears to disconcert you, Fraulein," he said quietly. He was looking at her with very level eyes, his face a stolid mask. "If your intuitions have warned you, well"—he interposed a pointed smile—"remember that a woman should never wholly disregard her intuitions."

Fraulein studied him a moment, then

whatever fear had struck her dissolved in a rippling laugh. If Elton had meant a subtle warning, Fraulein Gobbin interpreted his mood as a rebuke to her timidity. If intuition had whispered she had rejected its promptings as mere anxiety.

"My intuitions have told me much, Herr Pozas," she said with a mock solemnity in which there was an undertone of friendly vivacity. "They have told me that I must—depend on you more than any of the others, even—"

She broke off with a warning finger at her lips and smiled towards the door.

"But the porter is here for our luggage, Pablo. Please—you must not look so terribly glum as we are leaving the hotel for our train."

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRUSSIAN REAR GUARD

IF Elton traveled from Berne to Lausanne under secret escort, Herr Staubenwasser's Russian shadows managed to conceal their presence. Not even Savinoff appeared, and Elton utilized local porters in handling his baggage and effected his own arrangements for tickets and compartment.

At Lausanne they transferred to the late boat down the lake to Geneva. A full moon lay over the great limpid expanse of water, mirroring the high shores in their pin-feathered undulations, flaunting the lights of village and hamlets in broad illuminated ribbons. It was a night to hold the passengers out on deck under the romantic witchery of Lake Geneva's brooding beauty. Even the bar was deserted and in the salon an orchestra strummed listlessly to half a dozen faded dowagers.

Elton secured a stateroom in which Fraulein Gobbin might rest, but she insisted on walking the deck under the moon.

"Isn't it more logical that Señor and Señora Pozas would want to be out under the stars?" she taunted. "Besides, I would much rather watch the lake than sit stupidly inside."

They strolled about the decks, Fraulein clinging to his arm with vivacious patter, or expounding with rare understanding the intricacies of stars and moon. Astronomy, she explained, had been her favorite hobby since childhood, and she meant to have her own observatory one day to pursue a study that could never cease to interest her more than any other.

In Elton's absorbed interest there was not the slightest rift as his eyes, covertly alert for possible shadows, recognized an unexpected face. The young Herr Dittmar, agent of the choleric Count von Esch, German attache at Berne.

Recognition was mutual. Elton, passing the other without the slightest indication of having seen him, caught the quick leap of excitement in Dittmar's cheeks and eyes. The young officer did not speak, made no display of recognition that the ordinary eye might have detected.

But that moment's glance was flush with significance to Elton's quick perceptions. Dittmar's suppressed excitement was not that of a mere observer, an official shadow passing his quarry. It meant that Dittmar had achieved his ambition to join the hunt for Zumbusch. Dittmar was on his way to Geneva tonight. Tomorrow he would be one of Staubenwasser's henchmen in the adventure through France. Another fish for Elton's net.

The boat docked shortly after two o'clock at the Quai du Nord. A porter carried their effects to a horsecab which ambled at a snail's pace, its heavy hoofs echoing through the empty streets of Geneva. Fraulein Gobbin sat well apart to herself and did not speak. At the Belvedere Elton scrawled his registration. Señor and Señora Pozas. Their

reservation had been received by wire from Berne, the sleepy concierge said in French. As they were escorted to their suite on an upper floor Fraulein draped her arm lightly about Elton's waist and clung to him wearily. When they were alone, she detached herself with a yawn.

"The curtain is down," she said laconically. She sat down and looked up with another yawn. "Our little honeymoon reminds me of Frau Josefa, the great emotional actress at the Wunsterbund of Berlin," she said. "She played the most violent love rôles opposite Herr Glissner. Imagine their ardent passion—when there was such a violent dislike between them that they did not speak to each other off stage."

"Your point is well made, my dear Yola," Elton said with polite cordiality, "but really unnecessary. However, I hope we'll not find it expedient to hate each other so much as that—off stage."

Herr Staubenwasser came in at once, in dressing gown and slippers. He bowed to Fraulein Gobbin, without relaxation of a composed gravity in which his features were cast.

"The gentleman who occupies the suite adjoining does not exist," he said in French to Yola. "Please pardon my abruptness, but you must be very tired. You will find the key in the door. Good night."

She showed no concern at Staubenwasser's abrupt dismissal and left the room at once. The German agent sat down, offered Elton a cigaret from a gold case and lighted one himself.

"You speak French very well, I take it, *monsieur?*" he inquired and, at Elton's nod, added, "French is as much the language of Geneva as German is the language of Berne." He adjusted his monocle and indulged a superior smile. "One day, of course, German will be the universal language—as it should be. But for the moment, it is wise that we not speak too loud in any language, since I must be very frank. You found Mademoiselle Yola an interesting companion?"

"A very charming person," Elton said simply, intending to say as little as possible.

And clever enough to keep you in your right place—on this delightful honeymoon of yours, eh Pozas?"

"That was not difficult," said Elton politely, ignoring the taunt in Staubenwasser's voice. "She merely explained her situation, and I cheerfully agreed to play the game."

"Such a promise is easy to make and easier to forget with a woman as attractive as Mademoiselle Yola," Staubenwasser averred. "But if you should ever entertain any romantic delusions, you'll only make an ass of yourself, Monsieur Pozas. Although my acquaintance with her is slight, *mademoiselle* is the fiancée of a very rich young nobleman of immense holdings who is at the front with his regiment at present. They are madly in love with each other."

"Interesting," said Elton unconcernedly. "Thank you. But I've learned to keep my feet on the ground when on duty."

"Another bit of information. *Mademoiselle* is a great actress, as you may have suspected. Amateur theatricals, of course, because of her family, who really live in Denmark. She is making the present journey to be of service to the Fatherland—without compensation. In other words, her motives are patriotism, not paid adventure. The woman we selected as best equipped to cope with the notorious Babu for the reason that she once knew Babu in Russia."

"I'd rather thought that might be the case, *monsieur.*"

Staubenwasser crossed his legs, lighted another cigaret and leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing.

"*Monsieur,* I was just estimating, earlier," he proceeded shortly. "I've killed fourteen men in the course of my life. The first one in a duel in Africa

many years ago. The other thirteen in the course of the war." He snapped his fingers indifferently and gave a wry smile. "My conscience disturbs me as little as that over it all. Line of duty, eh? Kill or get killed. Is that not part of the day's work?"

"Unpleasant—but sometimes necessary," Elton agreed.

The Prussian agent pulled himself up in his chair and leaned tensely forward.

"But if I had it on my conscience that I was responsible for the death of one such woman as Mademoiselle Yola—my own life would be intolerable to me, *monsieur*. Do you join me in that sentiment?"

"I can think of nothing more uncomfortable."

"It wouldn't be a pleasant spectacle, would it? To see *mademoiselle* marched out from Vincennes in the gray dawn," Staubenwasser said dramatically in a tense, hushed voice. "A roll of the drums, a sharp command, the crash of French musketry and little Yola dying in the clay before your eyes! Would such a tragedy not be unspeakable?"

"Even more horrible than you paint it, *monsieur*. But why do you speak of such things?"

"As a reminder, Major Pozas, that her safety will depend, while she is in France, solely upon you!"

Staubenwasser's searching eyes were points of fire under contracted lids as he said this. Elton caught the curious note in his voice, something more of suspicious implication than mere reminder. He returned the Prussian agent's look without discomfort and coolly lighted a cigaret.

"You may depend on it that I will do my duty to the best of my ability," he said quietly. "But you must remember, *monsieur*, that you are the one of real authority—and really responsible for everything."

"Do you believe in intuition, Major Pozas?" Staubenwasser inquired in a new and softer voice, leaning back again in his chair, the semblance of an indefinable smile playing at his thin lips.

"More or less, *monsieur*." Elton smiled faintly and added, "Mademoiselle Yola asked much that same question. She seemed to distrust me when I told her I am American and not Mexican or Spanish."

"So—Yola is suspicious of you. But you were able to convince her?"

"I made no effort—in fact I told her a woman's intuitions were not to be taken too lightly."

"What, precisely, was her reaction to that?"

"She laughed and said her intuitions told her I was to be trusted. Nothing more was said on the subject after that."

"Excellent!" Staubenwasser affirmed. "I want her to feel that she is in safe hands—for while she has nothing to do in France, yet it is necessary that we all travel by the same route and in close liaison, since I have business in Paris. I believe I already told you my estimate of you—a man of great breadth of vision and high sense of honor."

"You were very complimentary in that respect, *monsieur*." He added pointedly, "But you said you were going to be very frank this evening—and yet you continue talking in parables."

"Frank—but discreet," Staubenwasser corrected. "I want to tell you on my honor that I have no mission of espionage in Paris. I'm to meet with an English agent of ours, named Creechwood, an extraordinary fellow who was long in Russia. Creechwood, for reasons I will not enter into at present, can be depended upon to locate Zumbusch. And as I have said before—the Allies are as much concerned in destroying Zumbusch as the German secret service."

"Because of the danger to certain of their great leaders," Elton supplied innocently.

Staubenwasser's jaw snapped shut and his eyes blazed.

"That, Monsieur Pozas, is the least of it!" he exclaimed, forgetting to modulate his voice. "Zumbusch plots serious mischief in France—as well as Germany—and England. And if he should rally a million morons behind his insane white flag—who dares reckon the mischief he might wreak! The death of Zumbusch—and the wiping out of his whole infamous crew is as much Allied business as it is German. As much your duty as it is mine!"

Again Staubenwasser settled back and composed himself. He snuffed his cigaret, took out his gold case and lighted another.

"But getting back to the subject of intuitions," he said quietly. "I place a great deal of dependence upon my own. Let me ask you a very frank question, *monsieur*, in the hope that you will reply without offense."

"Certainly, whatever you wish?"

"Let us suppose that my own observation and intuition warned me that Major Pozas is an imposter—an officer of the Allied secret service? Need I describe the consequences to you, if I had reported my thoughts to my superiors?"

Elton smiled broadly and gave a reminiscent chuckle.

"I not only was suspected—but accused. And spent one whole night in a cell waiting court martial."

"A few tests which you survived very ably. But getting to my point. Ordinarily my suspicions would have been enough for me. It was only under these extraordinary circumstances that I gave you the benefit of a doubt. That and my belief in your intelligence—your sense of duty—your certainty to see that trapping Zumbusch is the most important job in Europe today."

"I've always made it a point to do my duty to the best of my ability," Elton commented.

Staubenwasser did not pursue Elton's evasion. A cold smile stamped itself on his face.

"You will not blame me for taking ordinary precautions against a possible—surprise, eh, *monsieur?*" he said nonchalantly. "It is not so much an indication of distrust as it is common sense that I have in my party one you have not seen. Yes, my sixth Russian, and the ablest of them, who will look after your safety, *monsieur*, while you are in France—and *mademoiselle's*. I trust that is not offensive."

"On the contrary, I am glad to know that you are protecting yourself in every way, *monsieur*. You owe it to—to those under you."

"Good!" Staubenwasser's eyes narrowed again into sinister slits. "Oubain is the most deadly of all poisons, Monsieur. My sixth Russian, who is as hard to see as the thin air, carries it in his favorite weapon—a small hypodermic. One little jab—and the blood congeals in the fraction of a second. Yes—cyanide is a pleasant concoction compared to oubain, the poison of the Okhrana!"

Staubenwasser rose, adjusted monocle and dressing gown, and bowed.

"Good night, *monsieur*," he said. "In the morning at seven we take the tram to Annemasse and the shuttle train to the main line. By evening we will be in Paris." His teeth bared in an insinuating smirk. "I trust, *monsieur*, you will take the greatest care with your excellent health during the short time we are on enemy soil."

CHAPTER XV

SAVINOFF FINDS A RIDE

THE Prussian spy invasion of France crossed the frontier in scattered formation, but with van and rear protected against surprise. Elton saw the Staubenwasser expedition maneuver past the Franco-Swiss barriers at Annemasse, evidently

so many detached travelers, all equipped with passports that brought sharp scrutiny but no challenge from the frontier police.

The three Slav agents, Rascha, Savinoff and Zastrov, traveled together. Elton saw them lolling about the platform as he passed the international boundary. Young Dittmar also was ahead, strolling about alone, in high fettle, twirling a small cane. The two Okhrana agents of German name and antecedent, Jukow and Zeitz, arrived singly just in time for the shuttle train.

Staubenwasser, carrying a camera and several Swiss newspapers, brought up the rear. He protested volubly against French confiscation of his camera, an adroit maneuver to impress the French with his innocent stupidity, Elton guessed.

Fraulein Gobbin was in fine spirits, her large brown eyes aglow with excitement, intent on seeing everything with the apparent relish and ready enthusiasm of a vivacious young woman on her wedding journey. Lieutenant Dittmar was in the same coach of the shuttle train, but managed to keep his eyes discreetly to himself this morning, so far as Elton was concerned. On reaching the main line, Elton secured first-class accommodation, although the compartment on the crowded frontier express had to be shared with half a dozen others, three women and two men, who appeared to be Swiss and French travelers.

Elton found himself grateful for this intervention. There were plans to be considered with infinite care before the train landed Staubenwasser's spy expedition at the French metropolis. Dealing with the Prussian agent was not going to be the simple coup he had expected. Staubenwasser, with his flanking henchmen, was able to protect himself, keep Elton hedged in, mete out the death penalty for the slightest show of treachery to the Prussian mission. It was a situation for the most skilful handling—and even the utmost pains could not eliminate the risks.

That sixth Russian. Since the interview with Staubenwasser, the threat of the diabolical Slav had been growing upon Elton. Such a Russian could be counted upon to execute his orders without compunction. Likewise a skilful agent of Okhrana training would be able to thrust his deadly needle even under the eyes of the gendarmes.

He studied the other passengers in the compartment. Phlegmatic souls, long past the years of violence and adventure. Yet might not one of them be the masqueraded sixth Russian?

Elton remembered Staubenwasser's taunt in Berlin, when he had boasted the power of an image to shake the stoutest nerves. He smiled inwardly at the play of that sixth Russian upon his own nerves. It was as if a venomous snake lay somewhere on a darkened trail over which he must pass. There would be no warning until the death sting, and then it would be too late to act. Though the menace might be nothing more than a creature of Staubenwasser's imagination, its sinister plausibility could not be ignored, its dangers discounted.

What situation would develop at Paris he foresaw no hint. Doubtless Yola had instructions for him, he thought. If so she would impart them at the proper time. Yola was absorbed in the fleeting French countryside. Rolling hills gave way in a few hours to broad expanses of small farms, vineyards and the clustered stone houses of farm villages. From time to time she called his attention to some quaint hamlet, or splotch of fall colors in the October foliage. There was nothing of anxiety or tension about her, her whole manner as carefree and composed as a girl on a pleasure jaunt.

Elton avoided conversation, replying to her sallies mostly in blunt monosylla-

bles. The grim realization oppressed him that in a few hours he must deliver her over to the Deuxieme Bureau. No matter how disagreeable, he remembered that his duty demanded nothing less.

The picture Staubenwasser had drawn haunted him despite his efforts to put it aside. Fraulein Gobbin facing a French firing squad, her great brown eyes filled with stark horror, her pink cheeks with their olive undertone pinched and bloodless, her slender body taut and straining as pride clung tenaciously to the shreds of her courage against the last instant of life. Not a comfortable thought.

He shut his mind to the picture, thrust it back each time it recurred. He reminded himself that he was not responsible for this hideous nightmare of blood-letting in which the world groped. But he was bound by its sinister rules. Staubenwasser's spy team risked forbidden soil. The Imperial secret service was responsible for Fraulein Gobbin's precarious junket. He had even gone so far as to warn her, tell her bluntly that she should not disregard the whisperings of intuition. His duty now was clear. Staubenwasser and his henchmen must be trapped in Paris, just as Elton would have been trapped in Berlin had fortune so ruled.

At Lyons, where the train stopped for change of engines and crews, Elton got out with Yola for a stroll on the platform. Herr Dittmar was the only one of Staubenwasser's crew in sight. The young lieutenant, in vivid tweeds and sport cap, stalked back and forth twirling his cane, his eyes beaming the joy of life, of pleasant adventure. As if on a sudden impulse he stopped directly in front of Elton and bowed.

"Pardon me, *monsieur,* if I intrude," he said politely. "But are you not Señor Pablo Pozas, formerly of Mexico City?"

"The name Pozas is not unfamiliar to me," Elton replied smilingly. "Why do you ask?"

"I am Monsieur Jean d'Aix, of the firm of Mougeut, at Geneva," said Dittmar. "I was told you were traveling to Paris—and identified you by your charming bride. Your pardon, *monsieur,* but it is difficult to conceal a honeymoon. The lady is Señora Pozas, if I may presume."

"I thought, of course, we should pass as old married folks, bored to death with each other," Yola interposed gaily. "Your eyes are too sharp, *monsieur!*"

"Your pardon again, *señor* and *señora,*" Dittmar apologized. "But my firm has great interests in Mexico City and I will esteem it a great privilege if I can be of service to you. I have learned, *señor,* that you travel to Amsterdam. That is my own destination. I know Holland so well that perhaps I can do you some good service there. If so it will give me great pleasure. I sincerely trust I have not annoyed you. *Adieu,* my friends."

With another low bow, Dittmar was off down the platform twirling his cane. The train left a few minutes later, two more passengers added to Elton's compartment. He studied them covertly, a stodgy old couple, neither of whom conceivably could be Staubenwasser's sixth Russian. He laughed at the phantom and threw back his shoulders. He must not let that specter grow into a phobia.

THE train pulled into the Gare de Lyons promptly at seven. The same train and the same hour of the ill-starred von Blauzwirn arrival. What a flush haul for the Deuxieme Bureau net it was delivering this trip, Elton thought, and was struck by his own lack of enthusiasm. Yola imparted no instructions. They left the compartment, porters taking their luggage to the gates.

But Yola's manner was that of one who knew what she was about, where she was going. Out of the medley of yapping cabmen at the curb, a fashionably-dressed matron past middle age

stepped forward, a liveried chauffeur close behind.

"My precious Yola!" she cried, taking Fraulein Gobbin in her arms. "It is unbelievably glorious to have you in Paris at last."

When the first affectionate enthusiasm of greeting had spent itself, the woman turned to Elton.

"And this is Pablo?" she said, surveying him approvingly.

"This is dear Aunt Gonia, Madame Gonia Cuignot, Pablo," Yola said.

"Since you are now one of the family!" exclaimed Madame Cuignot, embracing Elton and kissing him lightly on each cheek. "But come, we must hurry out of this mob and go to the villa. My chauffeur will bring your things. I've invited some friends to meet you at dinner —among them a nephew of my husband's, a clever young fellow you'll like very much, Monsieur d'Aix."

The car threaded its way through the Rue de Lyons, on past the Place de la Bastile, into the Rue Charonne and out Bagnolet. By this route Elton knew that the German rendezvous was some private home or villa, and not a hotel. Passing on across Paris, they turned through the Porte de Bagnolet and headed into the suburb of that name. The two women chatted on in the way of aunt and niece after a long separation, until the car drew up at a fine stone chateau set well back in a deep garden of lawn, flowers and chestnuts. At the door, Madame Cuignot turned Elton over to a servant.

"Pierre will show you to your apartment, Pablo," she said. "Dinner will be served at eight—so you must hurry. I will look after Yola, since we have many secrets to talk over alone."

Elton was guided to a luxurious room on the second floor. Madame Cuignot, whatever her antecedents, had been established in luxury by the Imperial secret service. His room even boasted that rarest of all accommodations in the very finest of French chateaux—a bath. The place stood out in sharp contrast with the sordid old shop of the hapless Herr Gobert. Doubtless Madame Cuignot was entrenched as a rich widow, a resident of Paris since long before the war, maintaining this secluded rendezvous for important spy conferences.

Elton found it difficult to maintain a cool composure while he shaved, bathed and dressed for Madame Cuignot's dinner. With Paris under his feet, headquarters an hour by plane or four hours by staff car, the role of Pozas filled him with an increasing impatience. But he knew that he must patiently play the game, waiting for his opportunity. In Berlin the Imperial secret service could play cat and mouse with him, permitting him to come and go as he pleased. Here, he argued, Herr Staubenwasser would take full advantage of the Cuignot villa's isolation, of the Russian shadows, to hold him under close control.

Herr Staubenwasser had arrived when Elton reported downstairs and was in dinner coat. Madame Cuignot introduced him as Monsieur Boisdeffre, a dear friend from Basle. Dittmar was centering his attentions upon Yola, and was presented by the name D'Aix. The Russians were not in evidence, nor did they appear during the dinner. That was only because Staubenwasser regarded them as crass inferiors, Elton thought; and he did not doubt that the five ate in the kitchen, or stood guard about the villa grounds, alert for alarm or emergency.

The dinner passed off in animated chatter in French. From the conversation, light badinage and gay toasts to the bride and groom, the company might have passed for what at the moment they pretended to be. For more than two hours they sat at the table, with no slightest hint of the grim business that lay so lightly under the surface of their gaiety. They were retiring to the sitting room when Yola asked to be excused.

"I must confess that I am tired out, much as I dislike to leave such delight-

ful company," she announced with a weary smile. "What is worse, I have a terrible headache. Too much excitement, I suppose. Please, you will excuse me?"

"Poor child, you must be put to bed instantly," Madame Cuignot sympathized.

"I presume," Herr Staubenwasser spoke up, "that you are willing to trust Señor Pozas out of your sight, *señora*. Certainly, you will not deny him a peep at Paris—and I understand you are leaving for Amsterdam tomorrow."

"Not even a bridegroom should be trusted abroad in Paris," Madame Cuignot interposed. "I do not recommend giving Pablo any such liberty."

"I'd be glad enough to show him about if I did not have business," said Staubenwasser. "However, I'll be glad to drop him off at the Champs Elysees or the Avenue de l'Opera. He can return by cab." He turned to Elton with a smile. "Come, *señor*, get your coat and hat—it's a bit crimpy tonight."

"Thanks—Paris ought to be interesting," Elton approved cheerfully, and said to Yola and Madame Cuignot, "I'll try to keep out of mischief and not stay in Paris all night."

He was frankly puzzled as he saw that Staubenwasser was in earnest. They drove into the city, the Prussian agent giving no warning, not even by innuendo.

"I think I should most prefer to see the Montmartre district," Elton volunteered as they came into the Avenue de la Republique. "But I'll not trouble you to take me there. A cab will do."

"As you please," the other agreed, and as the car drew up to a curb for Elton to get out, Staubenwasser said, pleasantly, "At breakfast, I expect to have interesting information for you, *monsieur*. Please—do not see so much of Paris that you will not have a clear head for tomorrow's business."

Elton walked a few blocks down the congested street oblivious to the bilious blue glow of the shaded war lights, the stolid faces of the night crowds and the occasional importunities of brazen coquettes. A French vendor in high hat and evening clothes accosted him, purveyor of obscene pictures. A second, guide to the underworld, fell in step beside him with insistent proffer of professional services. Never had he been in Paris without the importunities of these craven creatures. But now he searched their faces suspiciously. Might one of them be Staubenwasser's sixth Russian dogging his trail?

He kept an alert eye for shadows. Staubenwasser was giving him rope for a purpose. There could be no question of that. And Staubenwasser's shadows were close at hand. Consequently he made it easy for them to follow him, while he formulated in detail the plan for evading them that had come to his mind as he rode into the city with their master.

Ostentatiously he hailed a cab, and gave the driver orders to take him to the Moulin de la Galette. At that place he took a table and ordered a glass of Chambertin, followed by a creme de menthe. Having drunk these he discussed drinks with the waiter and ordered a large bottle of eau de vie. After pouring a large glass of this, he took several drinks of the liquid fire, rose to go to an anteroom, hesitated, returned to the table and took the bottle with him. In the anteroom he hastily emptied the colorless eau de vie and filled the bottle with water.

Returning to the table he set out the bottle and poured the glass full, drinking it slowly. A second, third and fourth glass followed. Enough to set the most accomplished drunkard into reeling antics. Elton simulated the effects.

At a table across the room he had identified Savinoff. That Russian shadow was not disguised and made no efforts to conceal his presence. It was past midnight when Elton, now walking with difficulty, made a fourth trip to the ante-

room. Turning quickly through a small connecting room into the corridor he hurried out through the rear, groped his way to the street and walked tipsily until he saw a passing taxicab. The driver careened to a shrieking stop at sight of a drunken fare in evening clothes.

ELTON sensed rather than saw the figure behind him as he opened the taxi door. Intuitively he knew that his ruse had failed, that one of Staubenwasser's shadows was close behind. It might be Savinoff—or that sixth Russian, intent on swift destruction. Elton's mind estimated the danger swiftly. He lurched drunkenly and shouted to the driver.

"I want to go home—out at Bagnolet—live in a big villa there. I'll show you the place when you get to Bagnolet!"

Elton floundered into the cab, without haste, and closed the door. The shadow would have ample time to follow in a second cab, he guessed. But as the car started ahead, the door opened and a dark figure entered. In the blue glow from the war lights he caught hazily the features of Savinoff.

"Pardon, *monsieur*, but I wish to ride with you to the villa of Herr Staubenwasser," said Savinoff.

"Who are you—and who told you to get in my cab!" Elton demanded thickly.

"A good friend," Savinoff said quietly. "I have no funds and wish to ride with you to Bagnolet."

Elton muttered to himself, lurching in simulated drunkenness as the cab sped through Paris. Carefully he estimated his desperate situation, closely watching Savinoff and surreptitiously observing the rear for a second cab.

By the end of a kilometer he had convinced himself that no one followed, that he had only the lone Russian to deal with. But Savinoff was clearly tense with alertness. Although the fellow rode with his face to the front, Elton caught slanting eyes upon him. And Savinoff's hand on the seat beside him hinted at the sinister Russian hypodermic.

With patient determination Elton waited his opportunity. He lighted a cigaret and offered one to the Russian. Savinoff refused with a stolid shake of his head. Elton took a few puffs, threw the cigaret out the window and reached in his pocket for another. Half a dozen times he repeated this performance. The car was rounding a corner when Elton, lurching away from Savinoff, flashed into action. In his hand, as it came from his pocket, was the Spanish automatic he had carried to Berlin and back.

"Don't move, Savinoff!" he said.

Savinoff did not look at Elton, sitting without change of posture or expression as if nothing had happened. His Okhrana experience must have gauged for him the deadly earnestness behind Elton's voice. And if he had suspected that the other's drunkenness was a trick, he must have known now that he faced a sober antagonist.

Elton worked a jump seat into place, alert for Savinoff's slightest movement. The Russian's whole attitude told that he had not yielded, merely bided his chance, an instant's opening for his weapon of surprise.

Elton shouted to the driver to stop. Only by disarming Savinoff at once and securing him could he hope to avoid killing the Russian. But as the car slowed down, Elton saw Savinoff's hand slide slowly forward.

Elton's grim decision crystallized instantly. There was no second for warning. He fired point blank, three shots in quick succession, and leaped aside out of the course of Savinoff's collapse.

As the cab came to a stop Elton stepped out to confront the excited driver. He forced the Frenchman back into the driver's seat and got into the cab beside him.

"*Monsieur* is dead," he said. "You will drive me as fast as you know how to Orlay—and no questions asked!"

To Be Continued

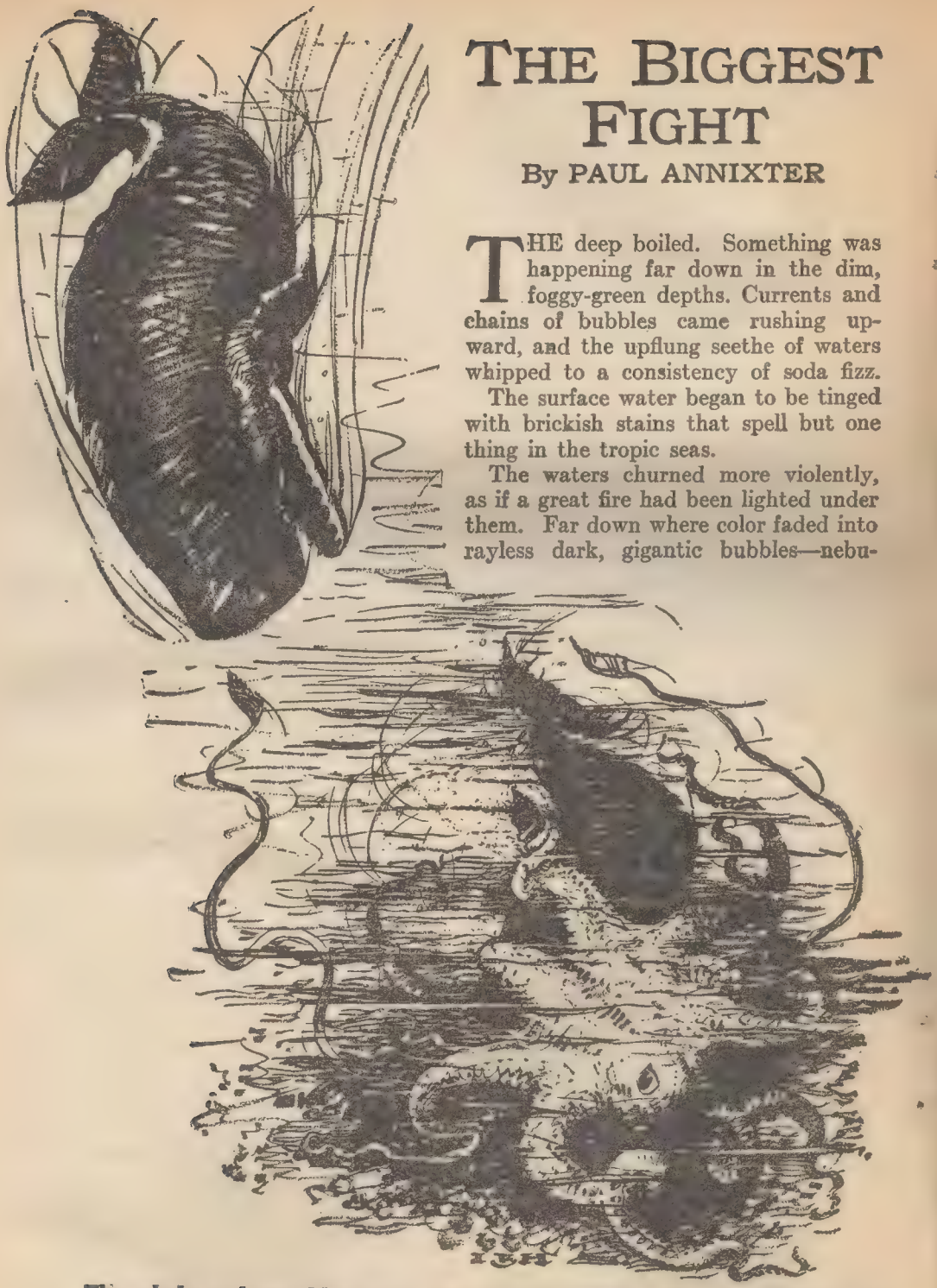
THE BIGGEST FIGHT

By PAUL ANNIXTER

THE deep boiled. Something was happening far down in the dim, foggy-green depths. Currents and chains of bubbles came rushing upward, and the upflung seethe of waters whipped to a consistency of soda fizz.

The surface water began to be tinged with brickish stains that spell but one thing in the tropic seas.

The waters churned more violently, as if a great fire had been lighted under them. Far down where color faded into rayless dark, gigantic bubbles—nebu-



The whole underworld rocked, swayed and tossed as in a windstorm, for all about were the ghastly creatures moving, closing in.

The cow sperm, despite her frantic struggles, was being borne down into the depths. Straight into the fray charged the bull at full speed.

lous, uncertain—were moving, coming up swiftly, taking vague shape. Abruptly a maelstrom of foam, all creaming and seething, lashed the surface, and through it a black fin cut, sharp, triangular and six feet high; then disappeared again. Another followed, and still another.

Then *he* came.

First he was but a pearl wreathed ghost of enormous size. Then a darkening shadow-shape, glaucous, almost black; alive, enormous and growing—as if a mountain or part of the sea bed had begun to rise swiftly from the abyss. Up and up he came, yard after yard, an oblong mass like some vast, blunt nosed torpedo up-ended in the swells.

That was simply his head—a gigantic, black, square-ended head, mild of aspect as some stupendous pollywog. At once a blast of oily vapor spurted from an S-shaped cavity at the top of the head in an upward and forward blast like a jet of steam—a jet that could have been seen by a whale ship three miles away. But there was no ship.

Up and up rose the vast head—or junk, as whalers call it—till it seemed it would never end; till it became plain that the creature was all head and no neck, with little, deepset eyes placed far back in it and down close to the water-line. Finally the long, narrow, saw-toothed under jaw was exposed—a flat, wagging twenty-five foot shaft of bone, hinged like the lid of a box and set with fifty enormous conical teeth that were still champing on a mass of deep-sea squid, the bait royal of the whale clan.

When at last the whole beast lay on the surface, rising monstrously above the lapping swells, he was a sight to make a landsman wonder if his brain were going. He was a young bull sperm, hardly in his prime, but fully seventy-five feet long, already a giant of his giant race. The great bulk of him was covered with a skin like glistening silk. Behind the gigantic head, which was fully a third of his bulk, rose a great hump on the back; but there was no dorsal fin there, and the flukes of the tail were set on horizontally, not vertically as in fish. For a mammal he was; an eon or so ago his ancestors, far smaller than he, had run through the primeval forest on four short legs. Like many other creatures, his race had taken to the water for survival during the great Age of Transition.

AS HE gulped down the ton or two of squid he had brought up from the depths, his great teeth flashed in the morning sunlight. Nine inches long they were, eight inches in circumference at their bases, each weighing three and a half pounds. As they champed and sheared, a number of wriggling armtips of the octopod fell from his jaws. These were swiftly snapped up by that black, triangular-finned convoy of scavengers that still ringed him round, rushing in and out with a curl of foam in their wake like small destroyers. Killers, they were—alias orcas or grampuses, the scourge of the seas, more terrible than sharks; small whales really, around fifteen feet long and carnivorous as wolves.

At intervals one of them would rush in with the speed of an express train, the water boiling in his wake, and dive, a big chunk of white blubber, torn from the whale's side, in his undershot jaws. The whale had been down deep and was winded. Once he had recovered, it would be no place for the killers, swift as they were.

Again and again the monster "blew" as he fed; the blows came at regular twelve- or fourteen-second intervals. Five dozen times he did this, covering a period of fifteen minutes in all. Whatever time a whale spends underwater, the same time must be spent blowing on the surface to reoxidize the blood.

All that time the killers nagged him,

wolf-fashion, chop and run. Their ferocity and voracity knew no bounds; but the worst they could do was small in the face of the calm immensity of the giant, the mountainous reservoirs of power, energy and hunger in the ninety-odd tons of him. That hide of his alone was a thing to talk about. In places it was a foot and a half thick; in its wrinkles and corrugations lived barnacles and shellfish. Beneath it were incredible layers of nerveless fat that swathed him in warmth and protection.

Once, with a roar as of cataracts, the sperm whirled upon himself with a full breath, flinging his great bulk almost clear of the water. With a crash that shook the world he struck the sea again, his great jaws clashing shut in the same moment like the dropping of an iron portcullis.

The killers scattered before him, some of them leaping aloft in their speed, revealing bands of dead white below the waterline.

In they came again with incredible speed, fins cutting the water like the black flags of their pirate calling. Again and again the great twelve-foot flippers of the whale lifted in air and struck the surface of the sea with a smash like the report of a three-inch gun. A killer floated on the surface, broken from end to end. The flipper had only touched him; but he lay there blasted like a ship that had struck a mine.

Finally the killers drew off in a black flotilla and did not sweep back again. For the whale had completely emptied and refilled his lungs again and was ready for anything—for a hundred killers, if need be. Grim and ravenous though they were—conquerors of the black whale and the mighty sulphur-bottom, the narwhal and the acre-large squid—the killers were not quite up to such a proposition as this.

The bull-sperm went in hot pursuit—a furious avalanche of flesh and blood surrounded by whirls of flying spray as he smashed through the waves—one of the fastest as well as the vastest things alive.

Over eight miles of sea the chase led, down to a depth of fifty fathoms, and up again, twisting, turning and corkscrewing.

Then the wrath of the Cyclops wore off, the ember-like gleam faded from his little eyes, and he lay still upon the waters. After awhile he turned northward, swimming at about ten knots an hour, sounding at intervals to a depth of twenty fathoms to get the clearer message by water-wireless. He was answering one of those mysterious calls of the sea folk that told him others of his kind were not many miles away. At times he sat on his tail, rising twenty feet out of the water the better to see ahead. About midday he came upon them—a pod of young male sperms like himself, lying like ships off an island. Some pulse of the monsters at play had traveled through the water to the young bull fifteen miles away.

THERE were a dozen whales in the pod; and for a couple of days the young bull lay up with them, playing and lazing the time away, diving at intervals to hunt for squid in the depths. For the hunger which drove these monsters was a thing of wonder, beyond the power of an earth-born creature to compass. Their throats alone were large enough to swallow two men whole; their stomachs were huge caldrons of digestive juices with the power to consume food like a furnace.

On the third day the pod started southward on a steady passage that would take them across four degrees of longitude. They traveled at an even ten knots an hour and held their course as steadily as if a compass were in the brain of each, their flippers boiling the sea, their great tails making foam in their wakes.

They swam the sun out of one sky and the moon out of another, only once

varying their speed when they came upon a vast school of pollacks—millions and millions of them packed together for nearly a square mile, so that the face of the sea boiled with them. Straight through the school they plowed, champing and feeding as they went, a hundredweight of pollacks at every swallow. The school, driven by one instinct for migration, did not scatter, but allowed the whales to bore through them from end to end, closing up again in the wake of the monsters and passing on into the west, followed by an attendant flock of mewing sea birds and a swarm of lesser sea jackals.

Some hours later when the whale pod, hungry once more, passed a school of porpoises, they left them unmolested. The porpoises were warm blooded mammals like themselves, and whales never eat their kind.

On the seventh day the whales sounded several times an hour to feel the pulse of the sea ahead; and from time to time they flung themselves high above the crest of the swells, revolving at the same time so as to peer over the sea with their little myopic eyes. Their brains knew now what they sought—the great mother herd from which they had sprung, which roved up and down the bulge of the world with the changing seasons, its migrations mysterious and inevitable as the movement of planets.

Late that afternoon they sighted whale birds in the distance, then one jet of spume, then another. They swept forward in a mist of spray and saw ahead of them the calm sea covered with whales: old, scarred, hundred-year-old bulls, young bulls, mothers with calves that gamboled, dived and nursed their mothers as mammals do ashore.

There was no commotion, and little notice was taken of the newcomers; they simply hove to and came to rest in the middle of the lazing herd, as if they had always been there. They were twenty years or more of age; and the heedless, freelance life of their young bachelorhood had come to an end. They were to be drawn into the life and order of the great moving whale city.

There were nearly a hundred whales in the floating city, mostly young males and cows with their young, but with half a dozen mighty old bulls which added to their bulk the wisdom of fully a hundred years. The old schoolmaster of the herd was a monster whose head was covered with the scars of battle with others of his kind, and whose great bulk was as full of iron as a blacksmiths' shop from his many encounters with whalers.

Ever following in the wake of the herd was a convoy of whale birds. There was always food where the whales were —fragments from the monsters' feasts and good pickings from the backs of the whales where grew many barnacles and small crustaceans. This constant currycombing of the birds upon their backs was of value to the giants.

In the months that followed, the herd traveled slowly southward. Sometimes they were harassed by whalers; but the old schoolmaster had an uncanny wariness in relation to man, the cruelest and most fatal of all their enemies. The young bull learned the telegraph code of the whales, by which they could detect one another through the water miles away, and how to signal danger from afar by releasing the *glip*—an acrid stream of oil which ran through the sea in long streamers.

Yet some of the whales were lost from the cruising city. And though they were not many, the young sperm saw and learned. He saw what happened when a ship hove up and the small boats put out from it. Once he saw the small boats surround the victim, men walking like bugs upon his broad back. Each time a whale was harpooned, the herd scattered and fled in terror, and did not come together again until twenty or thirty miles away.

That was one of the last seasons that

sperm whales were to band together in great happy schools of a hundred or more, for a terrible time was ahead when a single man by the pressure of a finger could snuff out the life of the mightiest whale from a distance, with a gun-fired, bomb-harpoon.

The young bull learned, too, the great chain of feeding grounds that are strung from pole to pole and cover all the great ocean deeps, including that mighty chasm known as the Abyss, which lies off Thursday Island.

In these great depths, which went down from three to five miles in the abysmal ooze—the terrible gray-brown mud of the ocean floor made of the death of ages of marine plants and animals, and meteoric dust settled down through centuries from suspension in the sea—dwelt fear in the form of an enormous pallid nightmare. A soft yielding body, with a great rending beak like the beak of a parrot, with awful lidless eyes of empty black and ten sprawling arms—the giant devilfish or decapod—the Kraken of Norse legend. Architeuthis, he was called, great brother to the octopus and the coveted prey of all sperm whales. He was also their arch foe, for the game went not always to the whales.

Like some enormous spider of nightmare proportions, this bleached monster drifted through the depths, seeking what it might devour. His horrible sack-like body was splotched with green and purple, gray and glossy black; and it was nothing but a vast stomach with a gaping maw at its top. He could, when he chose, move with lightning rapidity by spurting out jets of water from a propulsion sack under his head; but mostly he simply sprawled along the bottom, his two longest arms always outstretched before him, feeling for prey amid the ooze, the other eight arms ready to whip to their aid. Each arm is fitted with suction disks and fringed with tiger-like claws, so that nothing ever escapes his embrace short of shearing off the arms themselves.

Such cuttles never see the light of day. Their true dimensions, even, are not known. They can only be guessed from portions of specimens that have sometimes been swept ashore by hurricanes. But from these it is estimated that they are the largest creatures living on the planet today, and that many of them have bodies alone as large as the largest whale.

SOUTH and south the herd had pressed, beyond the lower headlands of Tasmania into that bleak and icy sea which revolves round the South Pole. Here, where even the hardy whale birds had not followed, where the stormy petrel and the vast brown albatross, with a wing-spread of fifteen feet, rode on the ceaseless gales, was one of the richest of all the squid hunting grounds—a nest of yawning chasms between undersea mountains that pitched perpendicularly downward three miles.

The young bull reached his twenty-sixth year that season and attained his full growth: eighty-nine and a half English feet, with a girth that was vast in proportion, placing him among the mightiest and most powerful of his race. Already he had fought for his life a dozen times against other bulls of the herd and against giant cuttlefish of the ocean bed. He had won the favor of a pair of young cows; but, with maturity, a spirit of restless wanderlust had seized him and he had not stayed long with either.

When the herd began breaking up he had departed alone, heading into the Arctic, seeking he knew not what, simply driven by the joyous uprush of his ever-increasing strength. North and north he went, until the bitter polar winds and the sight of an occasional sulphur-bottom whale warned him that he was approaching the great floating ice fields which are fatal to sperm whales. At times he was driven to seek combat in some passing herd from a

sheer excess of energy; but he rarely fought for a definite objective, or tarried to reap the reward of victory.

DOWN the bulge of the planet he forged again when the Winter storms began to whip the North Atlantic, followed now by three admiring cows who constituted his self-elected following. It was that Winter, while lingering in the warm Caribbean Sea, hunting squid in the deep chasms that lie between the Americas, that the young bull found what he had been searching for so long. She was a young cow, a member of a family pod of six sperms. She seemed but an ordinary cow sperm, little more than a third the size of a male. But to the young bull she was an answer to all his quests.

At first he challenged the scarred old master of the pod to battle, but that was unnecessary; he was only her sire. But she avoided the young bull constantly, ignoring his appeals. Yet by afternoon of the fourth day she did not avoid him quite so determinedly. When she dived playfully like a long diagonal shaft of silver and streaming gold, he went after her, following down and down into the darkening depths along the water currents in her wake.

For a half hour they indulged in submarine play, looping around and under each other. Once or twice they rested on the surface, spouting together. But the young bull had not yet won a mate.

Later, when the female went hunting, he followed her into the spectral darkness of the lower depths. Down and down they forced themselves; at every fathom the weight of the waters increased, pressing like iron bands about them so that their great bodies were bearing a pressure of thousands of pounds. Only the fact that their brains were wonderfully cushioned in many feet of bone and liquid spermaceti enabled them to function at such a depth. Nothing survived down there save those creatures whose bodies offset the pressure by being constantly filled with water.

Deeper and deeper they went to a realm of lightless dark and deathly cold, where not even a ray of green seeped down from the world above and great caverns and gorges yawned between a mid-sea mountain range.

At the half-mile depth the female cut short her dive and began undulating along horizontally, seeking what prey she could find at that level, the young bull close behind her. But no squid seemed to have ventured up so far from the bottom; presently they dived again, plunging down toward the three-thousand-foot level beyond which no red blooded mammal may descend and live.

Again they tapered off their dive, from sheer inability to forge down any farther, and went shooting along horizontally at a speed of about ten knots an hour just above the slope of a submarine mountain. In the pitchy blackness down there they could scarcely see at all.

Abruptly the female, still in the lead, brought up against what seemed to be a forest of great swinging cables. The young bull, just behind, had a vague impression of her struggling and threshing in the mesh of them like a fly in a spider's web. For the cables were gigantic living tentacles, waving house-high—tentacles of devilfish. They could tell, even if they couldn't see, by the sickly scent of musk that filled the waters.

The whales had run head-on into a company of the loathesome and horrible giant cuttlefish of the sea bed. The creatures were lying about everywhere. The depths were utter blackness now, for all the cuttles had immediately begun pumping the water and silt into a maelstrom with their siphons and squirting out clouds of sepia ink.

Two mighty tentacles flung themselves around the young bull's head like liv-

ing ropes and pulled taut, crushing his jaws shut. Others leaped snake-like to help them, still others following.

THE whole underworld rocked, swayed and tossed as in a windstorm, for all about were the ghastly creatures moving, closing in. The very sea was on their side, for the whales had been down long already and at this depth were out of their element.

The strength of those crushing constrictor-like tentacles was unbelievable. But the bull sperm rolled completely over twice and, backed by his huge weight, burst free. His jaws gaped and snapped shut, shearing off one of the pale streamers of his attacker at its base. Like a vast Zeppelin, the squid fled backward into the depths, expelling great jets of water and ink as it went. The bull plunged after it, then cut his rush short and swept back again at tremendous speed.

A message of dire distress had reached him. The cow sperm, despite her frantic struggles, was being borne down into the depths by two of the great cuttles. Straight into the fray charged the bull at full speed, diving beneath the female and cutting her adrift from two of the great cables that were dragging her down. But another monster cuttle, the mightiest of them all, had flung himself upon her like a huge-eyed leech. His bulk, more than twice that of the cow, pulled her irresistibly downward.

Once more the bull sperm swept in, cutting through another mighty tentacle. Two others quickly took its place, wrapping the cow round like heavy hawsers from bow to stern. And wherever their sucking disks fastened the blood sprang forth.

No more time to lose. If the cow, already exhausted, were drawn down a bit farther, the pressure would be fatal to her. The bull sperm seized the largest cuttle by the side of the head and furiously backed away. The cuttle backed just as furiously. The gigantic tug-of-war hung at a balance, except that the steam-saw underjaw of the whale was constantly champing and eating into the boneless body of his foe. The tremendous beak of the sea devil scored deep gashes in the bull's sides, and its claws lashed his flanks. But the whale's grip did not slacken and, writhing in its torment, the monster released the cow and fought for its very life.

For moments thereafter the bull sperm shook the squid in his jaws, dog-fashion; but the instant he ceased the offensive, the cuttle began subtly dragging him down as it had the cow, sensing that the sperm could not stay down much longer and live. Two hours' submersion at an ordinary depth is nothing for whales; but the pressure of this abyss, plus the strain of battle, had already claimed most of the oxygen in the lungs of the whale pair. In a few more minutes they must find relief in the upper waters or perish.

Abruptly the bull gave in as if to go down with the squid, descending in a diagonal dive, only to come up again in a long arc with an added momentum against which the mightiest struggles of the cuttle were powerless. Up and up the battle went then, the cuttle writhing like a tree in a storm, the sperm shaking it like a bulldog.

With all his arms the cuttle strove to strangle the bull and stop up his airhole; but the tide of battle had turned. With every fathom they rose the power of the bleached nightmare waned, while the whale's increased. And through it all, every instant, the sperm continued to champ and feed upon the pallid flesh of his foe.

UP IN the belt of shining blue and green, where surface fishes played like shooting stars, the finish was written. The squid writhed about to face the foe, and the sperm literally ate his way

through the pulsing Medusa-like head of the monster, tearing out great chunks of flesh as large as moving vans.

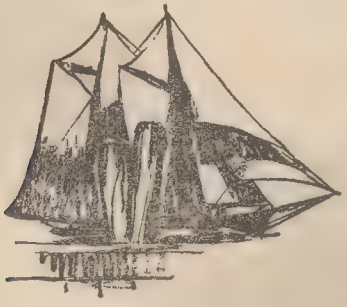
The body of the vast mollusk, as it fought, pulsated with wave upon wave of evil color—mud brown, purple, red, magenta, and back to brown again.

The dismembered remains of the cuttle floated up to the surface. The young bull, without even waiting to fill his lungs with air, plunged into the fear haunted depths once more to the aid of his hunted love. Only by calling upon his last resource, that mysterious store of oxidized blood carried by whales in the dorsal arteries along their spines, could he force his way down again.

The cow sperm was almost where he had left her, struggling once more against a dozen strangling tenacles. The young bull summoned his remaining strength. Three times he shot beneath the cow in a fearful ripping, chopping, swirling charge—his jaws working like the slash of monstrous shears among those twining, living cables—finally cutting her free.

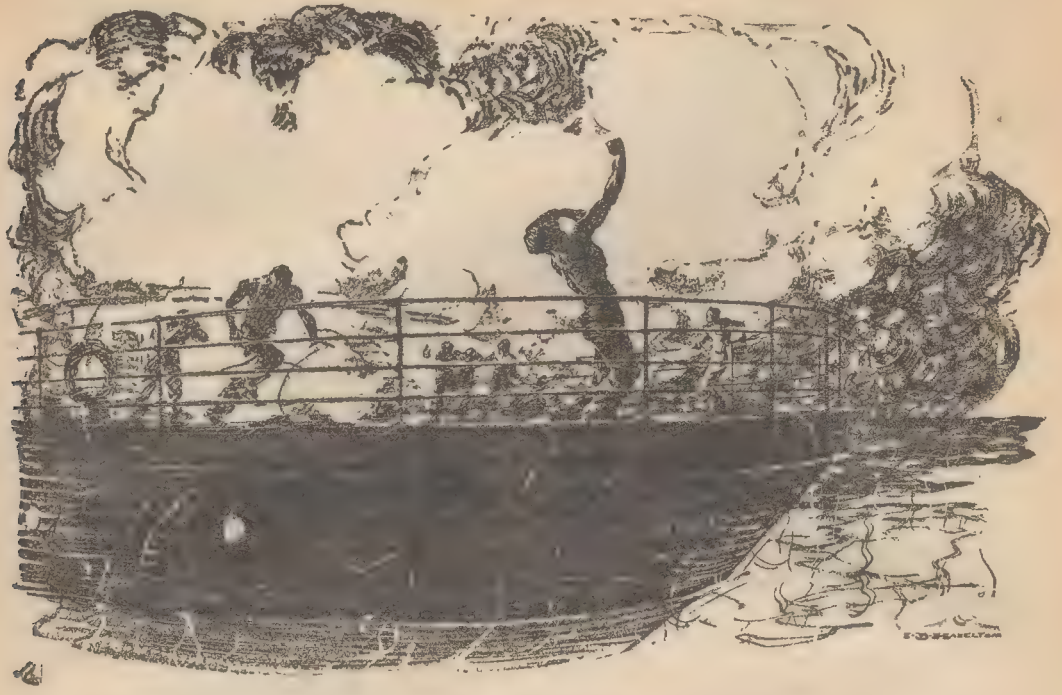
Then the two of them rose swiftly like released balloons toward the surface—racing against death itself, they were—back to the clean, sane world of air and sky and sun again. The speed of their ascent was such that their bodies shot clear into the sunlit air and fell crashing back to the surface of the sea. Thereafter they rested long, their great bodies heaving as they drew in enormous quantities of life-giving air.

And an hour later, as the red sun dipped behind the low Antilles, they were still lying there, quite close together, feeding on the remains of the king cuttle the male had conquered.



Plunder in thirty feet of water, and chips on men's shoulders—the hardbitten men of six schooners of all nationalities. Read Weston Martyr's novelette in the next issue of *Adventure*—"Lagoon Loot."

You could hear the crackling, sizzling flames and see the burning oil crawling across the water. And on the tanker's poop through a wall of fire, black shapes tottering . . .



THE RESCUE

By JACLAND MARMUR

THE chief mate of the *Martiban* thought it a great joke. He was sitting on the second officer's bunk, swinging his pajama-clad legs so that the straw slippers he wore slapped the soles of his feet like faint and sporadic applause. And he laughed. His laughter was suppressed, since it was almost midnight and it wouldn't do to awaken the master asleep in his room just overhead. But it had an intense quality, that low chesty mirth of Mr. Willard's. Gilbert, the second mate, expected any instant it would break restraint and go booming loudly and lustily about the little cabin, scatter itself down the alleyway through the open door to rouse every man of the freight ship's company, and then carry on in dying reverberations in the outer darkness of the south China Sea through which the *Martiban* steamed toward the Gaspar Strait and Batavia. But it didn't. It remained captive in Mr. Gilbert's cabin, chuckling and burbling up from the chief officer's chest. His slippers applauded. But the sea, spluttering past the vessel's hull with her passage through the water, hissed loudly in vast disapproval.

Mr. Willard didn't mind keeping Gilbert from his rest. This sort of joke was worth it, he thought. Besides, the *Martiban* was a twelve-thousand-tonner. She carried four mates: the chief officer stood no bridge watch.

"It's rich. You'll see if it ain't, Gilbert," he promised. "Rich and ripe!"

Eight bells came tinkling down from the wheelhouse. Feet shuffled up the ladders outside. The long bar in the en-

gine room clanged out the end of the mid-watch. A sea came spattering aboard. Spray exploded against the forward housing. The monsoon blew in from the open after port, strong and dank and wet, smelling of sea water and jungles. The *Martiban* rolled heavily. Mr. Willard scratched his belly and stood up, still laughing.

"He'll be down from the bridge directly," he said. "He's got to pass through the alleyway here to get to his room. Never takes coffee after his watch."

Gilbert pushed aside the pad on which was scrawled his navigational calculations for the previous afternoon, and drummed the top of his little desk.

"I don't see any use baiting the poor beggar," he said. "Why don't you go to bed and let him alone? Me too. I want some sleep."

"Sleep? Plenty of time for that. You won't hear this every—"

"You haven't a four-to-eight watch to stand," the second mate put in glumly. "I know all about him. Heard about it dozens of times out—"

"Sure you have. Sure you have! Who hasn't? The whole China coast knows him and his yarn. It's old stuff in every merchant officers' club from Shanghai to Bangkok and back to S'pore. But if you haven't heard him tell it himself, you've missed something, Gilbert. It's rich. I tell you it's rich!"

"Where in blazes did the Old Man get him for a ship's officer?" Gilbert shook his head sadly. "Third mate tells me he's got to sweep up the bridge every time he relieves the watch, it's that littered with home-made cigaret stumps. What a mess! He—"

"Get him?" The chief officer's laugh rumbled in his chest again. "Old Man picked him up in Batavia two voyages ago when we put a man ashore with blackwater. I'd heard all about him before, of course. But when that shabby gnome came over the rail with a sea chest on his shoulder looking for his room, I knew right off I was going to be shipmates with the famous Mr. Durang. Scared of his own shadow, he is. You should have seen him, Gilbert; you should have seen him! When he stuck his license in the chartroom rack and I saw it, then I knew for certain. Good Lord! Imagine a fellow sailing around with a fourth issue of a mate's ticket! Then one night I gave him a drink at the Savoy in HongKong and he told me his yarn. I thought I'd pass out trying to keep from laughing. Wait'll you—"

"I'd sooner go to sleep," Mr. Gilbert protested feebly.

"Sleep be— Hush up! Here he comes. Get that bottle out. Mr. Durang!"

The passing figure stopped and turned a startled white face on a narrow shoulder. It could be seen very plainly in the shaft of light flung into the passageway from the second officer's open door. A sea slapped the *Martiban's* flank loudly. She rolled down to it. A gust of the monsoon blew the smell of hot engine oil and steam along the alley. An iron door clanged. Mr. Durang's head darted about at the harsh unexpected sound of it. Then he shuffled slowly forward, blinking, very mouse-like and thin.

"You wanted me?" he asked.

"Come in and have a sip, Durang." Mr. Willard's square face expanded in a grin, and he waved his large hairy hand hospitably about the cabin's interior. "I want you to know Gilbert, our new second mate, better. He's a good shipmate, Durang, a good shipmate." The chief officer's pajama coat had come unbuttoned. He was scratching the firm flesh of his belly again. "We were just talking about things."

Durang seemed puzzled, frightened. His little grey eyes looked quickly from Willard to Gilbert and back again. Then very slowly his face wrinkled up in a funny wistful smile of relief. He was afraid, so afraid of ridicule and the scorn-

ful laughter of successful men. It wounded him so. And yet he wanted so desperately to be friendly.

"Well," he said, "it—it's mighty nice of you. I don't sleep well. Perhaps a sip would do me good."

"Course it would. Do us all good. Come in and sit down."

Mr. Willard turned his back, winking broadly at Gilbert as little Durang came hesitatingly over the weather board and dropped into a wicker chair by the washstand. The chief mate poured the whisky and cracked a bottle of mineral water. Durang gulped quickly and felt the fiery stuff burn all the way down. The truth was, he didn't like whisky. Couldn't stand it. It upset him, and made him say things he couldn't remember afterward. But he knew no other way of showing his comradely feeling.

"Thanks. That was good. Nice of you, Mr. Gilbert." He smiled shyly. "This is a lonely trade on the China Sea. And I've been out here more than ten years now."

"That's just what I was telling the second mate." Mr. Willard nodded emphatically, sitting down and kicking Gilbert's shin under the little desk. "He said he didn't believe it. Said you didn't look older than he is himself and—"

"I'm not." Little Durang grimaced to cover the shudder of revulsion in his insides at the alcohol he had swallowed. The top of his head felt loose, and a sick metallic taste was in his mouth. "I'm hardly past thirty-five."

MR. GILBERT looked at him through the rim of his uptilted tumbler. Durang's face was turned toward the open after port, with his lips parted as if he wanted to gulp down huge draughts of the wet sea wind that billowed the curtains there. Damnable rotten business, baiting the poor devil this way! And yet he heard himself blurting out—

"The mate's been telling me. Hard to believe. Course I knew at once there must be some reason for as good a sailor and navigator as you are shipping fourth officer on a—"

"There is."

"So?"

Durang nodded. His thin lips pressed together. Mr. Willard leaned forward expectantly.

"Aye!" the little fourth mate said. "There's a damned good resason. I'm looking for a man—a captain I used to know."

"No!"

"Yes. And by God! I'll find him some day. He—"

Durang's head dropped. Willard's face twitched with suppressed mirth, and he winked again at Mr. Gilbert as he reached forward and patted the fourth mate's knee.

"Of course you'll find him," he soothed. "But what—?"

"What?" Durang's head came up quickly. There was fire in his eyes. He slapped his narrow chest with the open palm of his hand. "He's got to clear me, that's what! My whole career depends on it. I don't care what else happens. I've got to clear my name and my ticket. He's the only man can do it. The only man! What shipowner'll give a command to a man with a red-inked license and forty drowned passengers blacking his professional integrity? No one. Can't blame 'em. It isn't that so much, though. It's just,"—Durang's voice was quavering, and his words tumbled out a little thick and slurred—"it's just that I like to hold my head up to all my shipmates and be decent and square like a salior should. And I—I can't. No one'll believe me until he clears my name. They laugh. They laugh! It hurts. You don't know how it—"

"Course it hurts," Mr. Willard put in blandly with the tips of his thick fingers together over his chest as he leaned back comfortably on the second mate's bunk. Things were rolling grandly. Wasn't it

rich, though? "Course it hurts," he said again. "Why shouldn't it?" Who's the skipper? Maybe Gilbert and I know him and could help—"

"Can't tell. Impossible. Wouldn't be fair. Not till I see him and make him tell the truth. You understand that? Got to do it decent. Ain't I right, Mr. Gilbert?"

"Absolutely right."

"Followed him all over the world for almost fifteen years. That's why I'm fourth mate of the *Martiban* now. I'd sail before the mast again in the stinkin'est fo'c'stle afloat to be in the same trade as he. I'll meet up with him one day, and he'll see he's got to tell the truth and clear me. It's the only thing to do. Look!" Durang leaned forward tensely, elbows on knees, his skinny hands clenched tightly before him. "I see it this way. A ship's officer is different. Not like you were a clerk ashore somewhere. You get fired from one job there, you find another. Mistakes don't mean so much. At sea it's different. We got a tradition to keep up. Somethin' behind us. Somethin' fine and grand. Been passed on for centuries. From sail to the clipper ships and on into steam. It ain't me so much. I don't count. It's the tradition has got to be kept clean. Clean as a boar's tooth! Don't you see?

"That's why he's got to clear me. When he piled the—my old ship on the Fox Rock and lost forty lives, he saved his own skin by damning me. And it wasn't my fault. I hadn't anything to do with it. I hate whisky, I tell you. I wasn't drunk. I didn't haul the course on my own. He did it himself. Himself! He thought I'd die, you see, in the fog and the sea. But I didn't. I was a powerful swimmer then. A powerful swimmer. And I got ashore. But he lied at the inquiry. He lied! And I wasn't there. I had pneumonia. They thought me dead. And when I got well, the Inspectors said they'd been decent enough to me by letting me off with a year's suspension.

"He was master of a brand new ship by that time, and I couldn't find him anywhere ashore. But I followed him. I followed him all over the world. I met him once in Sarawak and told him what he had to do. But he laughed at me. Couldn't reason with him. He was having a time ashore. When he's in his right senses, I'll see him again one day, and then I'll be cleared. It's the only thing to do. I'm not old!" Durang insisted with burning eyes. "Once that's settled right, I'll move on to where I belong. Get my command and look 'em all in the eye. Ain't that the thing to do?"

Mr. Gilbert was silent. He made no reply to that question. There was something appalling in the set eagerness of Durang's wrinkled face as he sat there, leaning tensely forward. The anxiety, the terrible earnestness of it, the straining, the crying for sympathy and understanding. The poor devil had come to believe his fantastic story! He had to, to hold himself together and go on living, sailing the oceans a broken man at thirty-five, junior officer of a China tramp with the fourth renewal of a mate's license stuck in the chartroom rack.

"Ain't that the thing to do?"

Mr. Gilbert could only nod. But the chief mate of the *Martiban* was going to have his little joke down to the very end. He came forward now on the bunk and lumbered to his feet, his eyes twinkling furiously.

"He framed it on you, did he?"

"Of course. I told you he did."

"And you weren't drunk at all."

Mr. Durang looked up quickly. There was something about that voice now he recognized. It was merry with laughter, trembling to break the bonds of restraint. You could see it in his eyes. It wrinkled swiftly along the heavy folds of his cheek. It twitched the corners of his strong thick lips. He was going to

laugh. Durang came weakly to his feet.

"You," he said softly, "you don't believe me."

The laughter exploded! Rollicking and tumbling about the cabin. Beating back from the bulkheads. Shattering against the fourth mate's ears. Laughter. Scornful and terrible. His head was back. All you could see of his face was his open mouth and his chin above the hairy chest where the silk pajama-coat stretched tight. A face pummeling laughter about the room. A laughing, laughing face!

Durang was trembling. His fists clenched at his sides. Then slowly they went lax again. He shriveled under the scorn and the ridicule of that huge man's laughter. He was limp and frightened.

"You want to keep the seafaring tradition clean! Hey, Durang? Sounds like our own Old Man talking. Clean as a boar's tooth, he says, Gilbert! Bless my soul, if that ain't rich!"

Squalls of uncontrollable mirth shook his great frame. He forgot the time of night and the master asleep in his cabin over their heads. Mr. Durang turned away without a word. Sick at heart, he stepped over the weather board. But as he went shuffling down the alley toward his room with his head bowed and his shoulders drawn in, the mate's booming laughter came after him like the cruel flicking strokes of a lash. There was no escaping it. No escaping it.

But at the other end of the passageway, Mr. Gilbert touched the chief mate's arm.

"Stow it, Willard," he said. "Stow it. You'll wake the whole ship. Get along now and let me get some sleep."

"Eh? Yeah. Sure." Mr. Willard knuckled his mirth-teared eyes. "Ain't that a crackbrained yarn, Gilbert? Now I ask you—"

"Course it is, Willard. No shipmaster could get away with a thing like that. Ridiculous. Ruined his life when that ship cracked up when he was a kid. He made up this story till he believes it. Poor devil. Got to believe it, I guess, to keep him going."

"Don't make it any less funny, does it?" Mr. Willard picked up his half-full tumbler of whisky. "I'll run along now and turn in. Bucks me up, out in this God-forsaken trade, a good hearty laugh like that. Does a man good. So it does, Gilbert. . . G'night."

He went out into the alleyway, lumbering along toward his room, with his drink in his hand and his straw slippers slapping the iron deck. He laughed as he went, softly but with a full heart. Mr. Gilbert watched him and shook his head.

"Shouldn't have done that," he muttered to himself. "Tormenting that poor lying beggar that way."

In his room, Durang lay stretched in his bunk. Fully clothed, he stared wide-eyed up into darkness. He heard the mate go by outside, rumbling with mirth. Durang shivered and clutched the blanket. He could stand anything, anything! Anything but laughter and ridicule. He heard nothing but the voice of his own agony, chattering in his brain, and that laughter tumbling all about him. . . .

MR. GILBERT, coming on deck for the morning watch, found a brilliant warm night of moonlight. The monsoon blew strong and fair, with a clean stinging freshness. The water was dark, like black marble streaked with mile-long streamers of white where the foam twisted and curled. The *Martiban* rolled southward before the following sea, her rigging and her funnel-stays singing.

But when he climbed the ladder and gained the bridge, he saw black silhouettes against the dodger. The master and Mr. Willard had binoculars to their eyes. Mr. Gilbert stared ahead. He saw leaping flames against the horizon, crimson and yellow, dancing in a fantastic pattern between the dark line of the sea

and the sky. The third officer met him.

"Malay fish prau afire?"

The third mate shook his head.

"Tanker," he whispered fiercely. "She's on a reef in Gaspar Strait. Blew her guts up when she struck. I saw her go! Like a volcano exploding out of the sea. God! you sleep sound, Gilbert."

"Good Lord!"

"Old Man's shaping up to see."

Mr. Gilbert plucked his glasses from the rack and fastened them on the burning hull. Beside him the master merely grunted. The *Martiban* throbbed closer. The tanker was a seething mass of flame, lighting up an enormous circle of sea. Showers of sparks flew heavenward. Her whole forward structure was a roaring furnace, her decks and all her iron work twisted and mangled into grotesque shapes that writhed behind the dancing flames. Mr. Gilbert looked for her boats. There weren't any. Nothing but the splintered stumps of the davits. His glasses ranged aft. The tanker's stack lay over at an unreal angle, the parted funnel-stays whipping the air. Her poop deck alone had not yet fired. It rose like a dark island out of the flames.

Black shapes darted about on that narrow blistering deck. You could see them plainly in that fierce red light, inky shadows staggering back with heads down and arms weaving before their eyes. He counted them. Eight, nine. . . The rest? Good God! Why didn't they jump for it? Mr. Gilbert's eyes dropped to the water. There was no water! Her cargo of oil or distillate, spilling from her mangled tank-holds, hemmed her in a circle of leaping, snaking fire. The sea was aflame all around her!

Mr. Gilbert gasped. He dropped his binoculars into the rack. Didn't need them any longer, the *Martiban* was that close. He became conscious of the terrific heat on his face. Mr. Willard was tearing the telegraph to Stop. Couldn't dare it any closer. You could hear the crackling sizzling flames now and see the burning oil crawling across the water. And on the tanker's poop through a wall of fire black shapes tottering back and forth like men searching escape from hell. One of them spun on his heel suddenly and flung up his hand toward the *Martiban*. Then he collapsed, seeming to sink into the heart of the roaring furnace.

"How can I bring a small boat alongside that?" Mr. Willard was shouting at the master. "The sea's aflame! She'd catch fire and burn us all to cinders before we pulled ten strokes!"

The captain's face was set. It seemed grey and ashen and full of shadow in the ghastly light of the flaming tanker.

"They'll roast!" he exploded. "They'll roast alive! I'll run the ship—"

"No! Don't do that, sir! I know how. I can do it, sir!"

Mr. Gilbert started. The mate and the captain turned toward Mr. Durang. No one had seen him on the bridge. He had climbed the ladder unnoticed, and he stood now against the dodger with one skinny hand clutching the master's arm while he stared at the tanker's name on her bows. He was short. He seemed lost in that company, a little wrinkle-faced man with burning eyes and dancing shadows on his sunken cheek.

"I can do it!" he screamed again. "I know how. I know, I tell you!"

"Out with it, then! Speak up."

"The work boat. It'll cost you the work boat."

"Damn the work boat! Get to it!"

Mr. Durang spun on his heel and thumped the chief officer's chest with his fist. Something had happened to him. His mouth worked hysterically.

"Put the lifeboat over, and the work boat. I'll show you. I'll do it. I'll cut a swathe for 'em through that oil. Quick! Good God, quick!"

The master knew what he meant. His face paled a little. Mr. Willard leaped for the boat deck. Durang followed him. Gilbert looked at the master and said

nothing. A moment later Number One boat took the water with four men at the oars. The chief officer shipped the rudder. Little Durang, standing on the bottom boards at his side, shrieked up to the Martiban's deck:

"The work boat. Put the work boat in the water! Hurry! Hurry, you fools!"

He waited for it. When it slapped the water he leaped into it and tripped the patent block-hocks clear. It was a small light boat, used for rust-scraping and painting on the ship's water line. Durang drew it alongside the larger heavier lifeboat and flung out the painter.

"Tow me in there," he shouted to Willard. "Close as you can get. Hurry! Oh, God! why don't you hurry."

He waved his arms wildly. The chief officer spat out a command to his men. The lifeboat lifted and went forward, trailing the lighter craft astern. Mr. Willard maneuvered as close as he dared to the rim of that burning ring of oil on the water in the center of which the tanker blaze dand roared.

"'Vast all!" he cried suddenly. "Hold her. One of you keep that bow wet. Use the bailing tin. Lively on it if you don't want to roast us all!" He turned his head. "All right, you crazy fool. What're you up to now?"

Durang was upright. He had a line coiled down and ready for running on the thwart of the little work boat.

"Let go my painter," he screamed, and flung over instead the end of his line. "Make this fast. Let it run out. Keep the line slack so it stays under water or it'll burn. Watch it. For God's sake, watch it! I'll run the work boat in alongside the tanker. When I give the signal —haul! Haul her back. Understand? Hurry! Hurry!"

"Idiot! You'll be burned alive! You—"

Mr. Willard broke off abruptly. Durang had leaped into the water. His head bobbed up an instant later at the stern of the work boat. He reached up and seized the rudder post with one hand, thrashing the water with his feet in the powerful leg motion of a skilful swimmer. The light boat went ahead of him. Its bow reached the rim of the flaming oil on the sea. Durang kicked sturdily on. The work boat penetrated the circle of fire, guided by the swimmer at the stern.

The small craft, parting the burning oil on the surface of the water, made a narrow channel of solid sea between jagged walls of flame. It closed in behind almost at once. But it left the narrow channel clear long enough for Durang to urge onward through the very heart of that blistering furnace. He kept his head low, swimming deep. It was his only chance. The tanker's name was *Norbec*. His last chance, the very last. He came up for gulping breaths of stinking air. Heat. Heat and flame. The work boat's bows were smouldering already. Hurry. Hurry. In God's name, hurry!

Mr. Willard watched in stony silence from his post in the lifeboat's sternsheets. A thin line coiled from where he stood into oblivion, submerged beneath the water; the frail link, the only link between him and Durang. The men, too, were silent. Sweat drained from their faces in the terrific heat. They peered into the flames, searching for Durang and his smoking boat. Mr. Willard searched for it, too. His chest heaved with his breathing and rivulets ran down from the swollen cords of his neck.

ACROSS a sea of flame, he saw the men on the tanker's poop staggering toward the rail. The work boat had gained its side. A black shape waved its arms—expostulating, entreating, praying? It leaped, like a shape leaping into the mouth of a crater filled with flaming lava. Another followed, then another. The last one now. He stood for an instant at the twisted rail. Then he

reached down and lifted something, something heavy. The limp form of a man. He strained with it, then flung it over the side. He followed.

Mr. Willard waited. It was hard to believe that anything living was still at the other end of that idly surging line at his feet. He held a bight of it in his hand. It stirred, feebly, as if some one had tugged at its other end with the last ounce of remaining strength.

"Haul!" shrieked Mr. Willard.

Four pairs of hands seized the line and hauled. They brought it in silently, rapidly, fathom by fathom. It was heavy. There *was* something fast to it. The chief officer of the *Martiban* saw the work boat appear through the crackling leaping flames.

"Faster! Faster! Haul, you! Haul!"

The work boat's bows pushed abruptly out of the circle of flaming oil, smoking. Little crooked tongues of flame licked its sides. It was clear now, empty and afire. Behind it a narrow channel of free water showed for a moment and then closed in. They hauled it closer. Little Durang still clutched the rudder post with one hand. His other hand was fast to the wrist of the first survivor. The rest trailed on behind, clinging to each other by hand and ankle and hair, a string of scorched, blackened men coming sodden and half-drowned through the water.

Mr. Willard's men hauled them aboard one after the other. Durang came over the gunwale last, sagging and limp. His cheek was burned. His eyebrows were gone. The hair of his head stank singed. But his face wrinkled. He tried to smile. He appeared almost happy.

"Powerful swimmer," he gasped, panting to fill his laboring lungs. "I was a powerful swimmer."

Mr. Willard shoved the burning work boat clear.

"Give 'way!" he snarled.

The lifeboat turned away from the flaming wreck. . . .

On board the *Martiban* again, Mr. Willard arranged for the care of the rescued men. All but the tanker's captain, who had been carried into the cabin senseless, and her mate who walked upright and needed no help. Mr. Willard saw them at last when he came in to make his report. Gilbert was there, too, standing against the bulkhead watching Mr. Durang who knelt, all dripping and wet, beside the settle on which lay stretched the bloody hulk of a man. No one else payed any attention to the little fourth officer. Mr. Willard came in and mopped his brow.

"Steward's looking after 'em, sir," he said. "I think they'll do."

The master nodded. "This is the mate of the tanker *Norbec*."

"Those eight," Gilbert cut in softly, coming away from the bulkhead, "are they all that—"

"That's all!" the mate of the *Norbec* spat out. "The rest—they didn't have a chance."

But little Durang heard nothing of that grim report. It came to his ears merely as a vague and distant buzzing behind his back. He knelt beside the settle, straining toward the bloated face of the unconscious man stretched out before him. It was streaked from temple to jaw with a jagged thread of clotted blood, that face. Below it the crushed chest pulsed agonizingly with the labor of stertorous breathing. Durang watched, unnoticed. His cheek was livid. He was unaware of it, or of the pain. His skinny fists had hold of the captain's forearm as if he meant to shake it violently to jar reason and life back to that senseless hulk.

Durang's face was twisted in an agony of eagerness. His eyes blazed. No one saw him. He knelt there, tense as a drawn bow. His shoulders trembled. The captain's lips had stirred! Durang shuddered in a violence of concentration. By the force of his own will he meant to pry open those leaden lids and part those

blue-grey lips. His fingers closed more tightly on the flabby forearm. The captain's lids fluttered, lifted, dropped; then leaped back to reveal watery blue eyes in a wide-lidded stare.

They looked at each other, little Durang with his wrinkled face glowing feverishly, and the master of the tanker *Norbec*. A century of time rolled by, filled with the buzzing of voices far away and indistinct. The captain's lips twisted. It may have been a smile, or a sneer. Durang's head shot down a little. The voice was weak and feeble and quavering.

"What the devil—you doing here, Durang?"

"You know!"

Durang said it fiercely, but in a bare whisper. Wouldn't do to scare the Fates away now. No one noticed. No one heard. The captain of the *Norbec* twitched his lips again. He knew, perhaps, that it couldn't matter any more.

"Damned injustice, Durang." No more than a feeble breath from the ghost of a past. "Did you—damned injustice."

Durang leaped to his feet. He whirled about. His eyes blazed. The red patch on his cheek was afire. The master of the *Martiban* turned around, startled. Mr. Gilbert and Willard turned, too, to stare at him. Durang's mouth opened. He choked. He couldn't speak. All he could do was to fling down one arm toward that panting thing on the settle. The captain of the *Martiban* looked down on it and shook his head mournfully. Then he bent over and put an ear to that mangled chest. He came erect at once.

"He's dying. Hasn't a chance."

"Good thing for him he is!" the mate of the *Norbec* said harshly.

"No! No!" Durang backed off, aghast. "Listen! He—"

But the other voice interrupted him, booming, careening, charging all around him from the confined bulkheads of the cabin.

"Better for him," the *Norbec's* mate went on, "better for him if I'd left him there to roast instead of heaving him into the water. Look at this! The log of my ship." He held it out, the book he had saved, wrapped in a strip of blackened canvas to protect it from the water. "I told him the ship would never clear the reefs of the Strait on the course he had her. He drank like a fool. Like a damned fool, sir! Then she struck and exploded and blew all those men to death. He was drunk as a lord. I know what I'm saying, sir! I went along to the fo'c'stle in the flames to see if something couldn't be done for the poor devils in there. They were past any help. When I came back on the bridge, there he was in the chartroom, blathering to himself like an idiot, scrawling all over the logbook. Makes me out drunk on watch and the wreck my fault. *Am* I drunk?" he demanded savagely. "Look at that log book, sir. A fool can see it's framed! Good thing for him he's dying, the lucky beggar. He won't have to face it now, when I show them this up at the Board."

Durang heard it. Every single word of it. He was trembling, trembling. That dying man there had the words of his own release fluttering on his lips. All he had to do was drag his captain over to hear them. Durang came forward. It was plain. Plain! Any one would believe him now. The mate of the *Norbec* had clinched the thing beyond all doubt. Beyond all doubt. He swayed up. His moment of triumph!

But suddenly he stopped short. The master of the *Martiban* was speaking.

"You'd better throw that book in the sea," he said quietly.

"Throw—!"

"I ask it. It's the only decent thing to do. He's as good as dead, your captain. Let him be dead in peace. You're young, and you're in the clear. They can do nothing to you, to your honesty, to your future reputation. You weren't in command. The dead man will take the

blame, but decently. He lost his ship through an error of judgment. There's no dishonor in that. The ship's gone and the man's gone. You can do no good flinging mud on a corpse. I don't ask it for him. I don't give a damn for him. There's a tradition to keep clean, mister. Throw that book in the sea."

The mate of the *Norbec* stared. That voice was so calm, so certain. He shrugged his shoulders. Mr. Gilbert looked at Willard and said nothing. Little Durang stared down on a heaving battered chest and saw blood-foamed lips still forming two words he had been waiting fifteen years to hear. When he looked up the captain of the *Martiban* was at his side.

"What is it, Mr. Durang? Did he say anything?"

The fire was gone from Durang's eyes. Something strange was in them. The tradition, the tradition ought to be clean. Clean as a boar's tooth.

"What was he mumbling, Mr. Durang?" the master insisted.

Durang's mouth opened at last. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing that I could make out, sir."

The master had hardly heard. He bent down and came erect.

"He's dead," he said.

Durang turned away and went out of the cabin. Gilbert scowled and pulled at his cheek.

"Willard!" he whispered.

"Yeah?" the chief mate growled.

"Something struck me, Willard. Durang—wouldn't it be funny if that was the skipper he wanted? Now he's dead. He'll never have his chance now, if that was him. Never. Poor Durang. It'd be funny, Willard. Funny."

"It would," the chief mate snarled. "Wouldn't it?"

But little Durang was on the bridge. He was startled to find that day was breaking. A fan of crimson and gold leaped up from the eastern board. The *Norbec* still burned, a black hull sheeted in flame on a reef in the Gaspar Strait. The sea was like slate, with long streamers of foam reaching across the troughs. The monsoon blew strong and fresh and clean. Little Durang shivered in it, for his clothes were wet and his burned cheek ached with stabs of pain. He reached into the rack and brought out his tobacco and papers. He rolled himself a cigaret, put match to it, and let it hang from the corner of his mouth as he puffed.

He heard footsteps behind him, climbing the ladder. He did not turn. If it should be Mr. Willard, let him come up. Let him come up and laugh. Somehow Durang knew he couldn't be hurt by it now. He wasn't afraid of that laughing face. Not now. Not ever any more.

"Jim had roped a maverick back in the hills. Somebody rode up to him in plain sight. This fellow shot Jim 'bout an inch above his heart."

A Rule Of The Game

By JOHN REID BYERS

THIRTY rough dry miles from the sandy draw where big Jim Hendricks had lain dead beside the thirstily bawling hog-tied calf, Pat Lumley reined in his weary horse. His lean, tight-muscled face—a face so darkly leathern as to make his blue eyes seem almost colorless—was heavily thoughtful as he looked down toward the unpainted frame building which was Douglas McLean's home. "The distance ain't so much," he muttered. "And nothing but the buzzards to watch a man's comings and goings up here. And yet—" He shook his head slowly. "He couldn't have done it. He just physically couldn't." For another minute he let the short-coupled dun breathe. "Just the same, I reckon I'll drop in and take a look at him," he decided as he lifted the reins.

No one answered his halloo as he dismounted before the ranch house. But the door was unlocked, and a moment's examination of the kitchen convinced him that breakfast had been cooked and eaten there. "Likely he's out riding fence," he reflected as he emerged from the house. He knew that Douglas McLean lived alone. The McLean range was fenced in—in part by arid nature, in part by carefully maintained barbed wire—and its owner needed to hire help to handle his five or six hundred head of stock only at round-up time.

But there had been a day, Pat Lumley knew, when Douglas McLean had planned to live alone no longer. It was that knowledge which had brought him here; it was that knowledge which caused him to stand squinting at the declining sun now. "By rights he'll be coming home for supper inside of an

hour," he mused. "And—well, it'll be sort of interesting to see him."

Pat Lumley rolled a leisurely cigarette. Then, sparingly, he watered the dun at the hewn cedar trough beside the corral. It was as he pulled the reluctant horse away from the trough that his eyes fell on the nearest of the corral's high-head, foot-thick posts. Scattered along the upper third of its length were more than a dozen bullet holes. Pat Lumley drew deeply on his cigarette as he considered them. The next post, too, was bullet scarred. Leading the dun, he began a slow circuit of the corral. Every tall post showed at least half a dozen bullet holes; some of them twenty-five or thirty. And while some of those holes seemed to be several months old, others might have been made the day before.

Lumley was frowning when he reached the trough again. "Counting misses, that's quite a bit of ammunition Doug's been using up lately," he told the dun. "And—well, I wonder, now—" Lowering his eyes, he scanned the hard-packed ground. His mouth grew a little tighter as he discovered the scuffled footprints of the marksman who had fired a dozen shots at that particular post. They were hardly six feet from its base. "And at that distance anybody at all could just about put six bullets into the same hole," he pondered. "Only he didn't. That means he was practising quick draws." Again, almost regretfully, he shook his head. "It's not that easy. Doug McLean could've practised quick draws for the rest of his life, and he wouldn't have been able—" Squatting on his heels, he examined the blurred footprints more closely.

Frosted curtains seemed to have dropped over Pat Lumley's pale eyes when he rose to his feet. His frown had vanished, but his lips were more than ever tight as he turned the dun into the corral. Walking back to the house, he seated himself deliberately on the kitchen step. "Yes, it'll be sort of interesting to see him," he repeated softly.

The sun was nearly out of sight behind the western hills, and Pat Lumley was pinching out his fourth cigarette when Douglas McLean rode into the yard. McLean was a small man; stockily built and middle-aged. He wore sun-bleached overalls, half-boots, a faded hat and a black coat. His shoulders were heavily muscled and a little stooped. His face, too, was heavy; a square-chinned, stolid face, with a morose slit for a mouth. His black eyes were faintly surly as he swung to the ground and confronted Lumley. "Look here, Sheriff, if it's a jury duty notice you've come to give me, you've got to get me off," he said doggedly. "I can't afford to hire a man to look after things here while I'm wasting my time down at the county seat."

Pat Lumley tossed the dead cigarette from him. "Nothing like that, Doug." His voice was without inflection; his lean face expressionless. "I was just riding by, and I thought I'd drop in. It's quite a while since I've seen you. And I wouldn't scarcely've known you at a distance," he went on slowly. "Every time I've seen you in the last five or six years, you were wearing that old tan coat. And now all at once you blossom out in a new one."

McLean seated himself at the other end of the kitchen step. His stolid face was devoid of emotion; but it seemed to Lumley that his eyes were puzzled and a little wary. "Oh, the old coat was getting pretty well wore out," he answered. "I shoved it in the stove a couple of weeks back and went to wearing this one."

The black coat was not buttoned. It fell away from McLean's shoulders now, to disclose the walnut butt of the heavy revolver slung beneath his left arm. Lumley's frosted eyes dwelt casually on the low-hung gun. "Guess you're the only man in this part of the country that wears his gun in a shoulder holster. Doug," he said in the same inflectionless voice. "How do you like the rig? I've

been thinking some of getting me one to carry a second gun."

McLean's heavy shoulders moved slightly. "Good enough. It's a lot more comfortable riding than a holster like yours."

"Slow, though—if a man wanted to get his gun out in a hurry."

McLean shrugged again. "All the use I've got for a gun is to shoot a bogged steer now and then. I never could pull one fast enough to do myself any good, even as a young fellow. I guess you know that."

Lumley nodded slowly. "Yes. If I didn't— You know, somebody killed Jim Hendricks yesterday," he said quietly.

McLean's head jerked up. It was a minute before he spoke. "If you're waiting for me to say I'm sorry—well, you'll have a long wait! How'd it happen?"

"Sort of funny." Lumley's voice was levelly deliberate. "Jim had roped a maverick back in the hills. He'd lit a fire to heat his running iron. Somebody rode up to him, right in plain sight. He got off his horse, and Jim took a couple of steps to meet him. The way their feet dug into the sand it looked like they stood there, five or six feet apart, talking for two or three minutes. Then this fellow shot Jim 'bout an inch above the heart, and turned around to get on his horse and ride off." Lumley paused significantly. "Jim Hendricks was chain-lightning with a gun. I don't know more than two-three men who'd have half a chance, going against him. But he never even got his gun out."

McLEAN'S square face was impassive. "Didn't the tracks give you some idea—" he began.

Lumley shook his head. "It was dry sand where it happened. There weren't any clear tracks. And this other fellow was riding a barefoot horse. No chance of trailing him, the way the hills are tracked up by wild horses."

McLean's eyes had moved toward his horse. "I always shoe on the fore feet," he said; and his voice was as toneless as Lumley's own. For a moment he was silent. "Look here, Lumley, were you thinking—?"

"That you stood face to face with Jim Hendricks—and beat him to the draw?" Lumley shook his head again, definitely. "No, Doug, I never thought that. Though I've sort of wondered sometimes why you never— It's pretty close to a year now," he finished softly.

"Pretty close to a year since I rode off to get married, and found the girl that'd promised me had run off the night before—with Jim Hendricks!" McLean's mouth twisted savagely; his eyes were molten with passion; his whole figure had grown tense. Then, as suddenly as it had come, that tension relaxed. "And yet—what could I do?" he asked grimly. "He was fifteen years younger than me, and forty pounds heavier. I couldn't have stood up against him two minutes with my hands. And with a gun—" He laughed discordantly.

"There could have been—other ways of getting back at him," Lumley suggested gently.

McLean's eyes blazed again. "Bushwhacking him, you mean? Or shooting him from behind? That wouldn't be my way of doing things, Lumley! And besides—" His voice stopped short.

Pat Lumley nodded gravely. "You'd've wanted the satisfaction of telling him what you thought of him first. Of letting him know who was getting him—and why." He paused for a moment. When he went on it was in a meditative drawl. "My father was raised up in Kentucky; back in the days before the war, when fighting duels was just about as popular as horse-racing—and maybe a bit more frequent. I remember him telling me about it. They had what they called a code—a sort of a set of rules to run things by. Out here—well, we've always been pretty informal about settling our differences. But just the

same— It's all kind of like a game, with rules that everybody understands, and that don't get broken much. Things like a man with a reputation for being fast waiting for the other fellow to make the first move. And not shooting a man from behind." Again Lumley paused. "That would be pretty hard to do, even in a pinch," he added thoughtfully.

There was another minute of silence. McLean did not break it. Lumley resumed in the same thoughtful voice. "I was remembering that trouble Jim Hendricks and Billy Jeffries had, down by the shipping pens in town two years back. You were there, weren't you? Billy'd never liked Jim, but he had sense enough to know he hadn't any business tangling with him. But this time Billy was full of liquor and got to feeling brave. He walked right up to Jim and made quite a speech; called Jim out of his name plenty. Jim just stood there looking at him till Billy sort of run down. Then he says, 'Make your move,' quiet and cold. I guess there was something about his voice that sobered Billy up. Because all at once he turned around and started to run. And Jim just stood there looking after him, kind of foolish. Somehow he couldn't go for his gun—not after Billy'd turned his back."

McLean's face was wooden; but he jerked his head up and down. "I'd feel that way myself," he said harshly.

"Judging by the looks of the posts down at the corral, you've been burning quite a little powder lately." Pat Lumley's voice was easily casual.

McLean smiled; grimly and without mirth. "Yes. And I won't say that I didn't have notions," he admitted. "I even sent away for a quick draw holster. I'd tie it down to my leg and practise evenings. It wasn't any good, and I knew it wasn't. If a man's slow with a gun when he's twenty, no amount of practising is going to make him fast at forty-five. But likely I'd finally have gotten crazy enough to —to go looking for him, if somebody hadn't beat me to it. I guess I owe whoever it was a vote of thanks."

"Suppose you walk down to the corral with me, Doug." Quiet command edged Lumley's voice now. "There's something I'd like to have you look at."

McLean's face was still a stolid mask, but he rose without seeming hesitation. Side by side, but several feet apart, the two men walked toward the corral. Half a stride from the blurred footprints he had crouched to study an hour earlier, Lumley turned to face his companion. "Look at those, Doug," he said evenly. He pointed toward the footprints without taking his eyes from McLean's face. "I can understand your practising drawing as you turned. But these here—You see, the heel marks are nearest the post you were shooting at—just as if you were turning *away* from it . . ."

McLean moved a step closer. Standing face to face with Lumley and hardly three feet away, he lowered his head to look at the indicated footprints. "I don't quite see what you're getting at, Sheriff—" he began. Then his head went up sharply. "Wasn't that a horse nickering?" he demanded. Pivoting deliberately on his heel, he turned as though to scan the western ridge. A sharp bulge appeared beneath his left armpit. Flame blazed deafeningly through the fabric of his black coat.

But Lumley had side-stepped, his hand flashing down, as McLean turned. His gun spoke heavily, twice. McLean's arms jerked up and out as he fell forward. For a moment his extended legs twitched. Then they were still.

From the charred tear in the black coat a thin wisp of smoke rose slowly. But Lumley's eyes were fixed on the two dark holes in the precise center of that black coat's back. They were the first bullet holes he had put into a back. After a minute he drew his left hand across his mouth. "Yes, you can do it," he said softly, as if completing an earlier thought. "But—it feels funny."

The Camp-Fire

NOW and then some of the characters that W. C. Tuttle marches across the stage in a story have amazing names. Here in the editorial office prevailed a general notion that he must sit up late now and then scratching his head to think up a new nickname or moniker. In fact, we accused him of it.

To which he replied with the following communication. After reading it, we are quite convinced. Truth is stranger than fiction, and the local friends of any picturesque character are as inventive as any writer. Hereafter W. C. Tuttle may name any character any name he wants to. Here is his letter:

Van Nuys, Calif.

At one time I lived in a community, where there was an abundance of Smiths. In fact, there were so many bearing the same given name that it was necessary to give them nicknames.

There was Big, Little and Medium John Smith, all in one family. Some of the others were Graveyard, Diehard, Doughgod, Doughnut, Big Foot, Limpy, One Ear and Huckleberry Bill. The best yarn about those names was the way in which plain Bill Smith added the huckleberry.

Bill Smith was a jumpy cow-poke. He was spooky, if you know what I mean. He wore a frightened look, and at a sudden noise, he would almost jump out of his boots. Of course, the other cowboys got a lot of amusement out of Bill, which didn't help his case any.

It was evening in a little cow-town, and I happened to be in a saloon, along with Old Dutch, the elongated owner of the place, and a Swede lumberjack, named Swenson. Bad blood had existed between Dutch and the Swede for quite a while, but they were drinking together, when I came in. Needing a third party, who was neutral, they included me.

After numberless drinks Dutch informed me that he and the Swede were going to fight a duel. One of them must die. We went into details on the arrangements. The saloon was the battleground, and the weapons were a sawed-off shotgun and a 45-70 rifle. Dutch asked me to inspect the weapons and see that they were properly loaded. One victim was to stand in the southwest corner, while the other stood in the northeast corner. That would put them about thirty feet apart; just right for a double-killing. The choice of weapons was quite a problem, until I suggested dealing cards, the first ace to draw the shotgun.

I dealt the cards, and Dutch got the first ace. Much to my amazement, he selected the rifle.

"Dis damn Swede iss too tough for birtshot," he explained. "I vant to kill him deat."

"Ay von't fight mitout de rifle," declared the Swede. "Ay am not vishing to steeng dis damn Cherman, Ay van to kill him."

Deadlocked—absolutely. I suggested pick-handles. In fact, I ran the gamut of possible weapons, but to no avail. Finally the Swede, disgusted, left the saloon.

"If you coom back, I shoot you sure," was Dutch's parting threat.

"Yah!" snorted the Swede. "Ay coom back all right."

Dutch sat down against the wall, rifle across his knees, and waited, while I sat on top of the bar. The suspense wasn't terrible, because I knew Dutch was too drunk to hit anything. Suddenly the door latch jingled. But it wasn't the Swede, it was Bill Smith, hand on the latch, looking back across the street.

Old Dutch hit that door like a ton of brick, smashed it open against poor Bill, yelling:

"Damn you, I kill you sure!"

Bill had a horse at the hitch-rack, but he wasn't going to be bothered with any horse. His father's ranch was two miles south of town, and Bill made it in nothing flat. In fact, he was going so fast that he missed the main gate, and ran into the barb-wire fence at the far end of a calf corral.

Bill's yells and groans attracted his father's

pack of mongrel dogs, and their barking aroused Bill's father, who had had several calves stolen lately; so the old man grabbed his rifle, stepped out in the moonlight and started throwing thirty-thirty slugs down there around poor Bill.

Bill was hung up in the barb-wire, but he tore loose, took with him what he couldn't shuck loose, and headed for the high hills. Five days later a posse found him, and they had to rope him, before they could convince him that it was all a mistake. He had lived all that time on huckleberries. *He earned his name.*

—W. C. TUTTLE

THERE has been a big hub-bub about the galleon in the desert. Numerous letters have come in, varying from those who declare they have seen this mysterious ship to one who says it is a yarn invented by an irresponsible newspaperman who was later eaten by savages and gave them a terrific attack of indigestion! Follow two letters from *Ask Adventure* experts:

Los Angeles, Calif.

In last month's issue I answered a query relative to the "Lost ship in the California Desert." I gently pooh poohed the story—legend—tale or what will you. Past experience in replying to *Adventure* letters in this vein has brought me some times a flock of correspondence slightly sprayed with vinegar. Not so now.

Out of the fifty or more letters that have come I pick two as typical and especially informative.

Mr. Charles Edward Roe of Hudson, Mass., rises to state—

"Fifteen years ago I was running an assay office in a town about 30 miles from Prescott and of course had a lot of prospectors as customers and heard many strange yarns. One man told me of seeing, sometime in the eighties, a ship buried in the sand and silt of the Colorado river, south of Yuma, about at the border. He said it showed stern and bow and that the bow was shaped like an animal's head, something like a horse. He thought it was about 100 feet long and 15 or 20 feet wide. I showed him some pictures of old ships and he picked out a viking ship as being the nearest. In 1925 the Post Office issued a five cent stamp with a picture of a Viking ship—carrying an American flag!"

And now from the scene of action. Stevens H. Harris of El Centro writes—

"Having noted in the July issue of *Adventure* a query concerning an old story of a Spanish galleon being found in Imperial Valley by early explorers, I asked what is probably the best informed person living in such matters, pertaining to the Colorado Desert before settlement. The above authority is the justly celebrated C. N. Perry, prominently identified in the survey and development of Imperial Valley since 1892 and an extraordinarily charming old gentleman. His reply was as follows: "This story was written for the San Francisco Chronicle in 1892 by a chap named Robinson, and was not supported by a vestige of fact. This Robinson later wandered down to Tiburon Island and was eaten by the Sera Indians, causing among them a wide spread epidemic of indigestion, I was informed."

—FRANK WINCH

AND Arthur Woodward, whose *Ask Adventure* department is American Anthropology but who had already looked into the ship of the desert controversy, writes:

—Los Angeles, Calif.

There was a ship stranded in the sand hills of the Imperial Valley but it was *not a galleon* and it contained no treasure. It came about in this manner.

In the 1860's gold was discovered in large placer fields along the Colorado river above Yuma. Hundreds of miners flocked thither from all points of the compass, some made their pile, but the majority made just wages, some got nothing but a distaste for the desert.

One outfit heading into the gold region in 1862 had as one of its members a J. A. Talbot, adventurer, ex-soldier of the Mexican war, whaler, newspaperman, etc. In the *Golden Era*, a magazine published first in San Francisco and later at San Diego, in 1885, Talbot told of the experiences of his party and the ship in the desert. To facilitate crossing the Colorado river and also, going up and down stream to save overland travel, the party decided to have a vessel constructed in Los Angeles and cart it overland on wagon wheels to the river. Accordingly they had the firm of Perry, Woodworth and Company construct a twenty-one foot skiff with a single mast for sailing. This they mounted on wheels and took on board their very literal desert schooner, two wagon loads of provisions. However, in the lowest part of the desert, the teams gave out and they had to abandon the ship with her cargo.

And said Talbot, "Mark my words—*that* is the origin of the ship in the desert. She had two wagonloads of groceries and provi-

sions on board, and those who find her are welcome to all my treasures on 'that desert ship that sails with neither sea nor breeze.'"

"Eight years after the ship was abandoned one Charley Clusker of San Bernardino headed out into the desert to search for the famous 'lost ship.' Indians coming across the desert had reported seeing the strange denizen of the sands and Clusker, not knowing the real story, set forth to find the vessel. On December 1, 1870, the Los Angeles *Star* carried a reprint of a short item from the San Bernardino *Guardian* announcing that "Charley Clusker and party returned from the desert yesterday, just as we were going to press. They had a hard time of it, but *they have succeeded in their efforts. The ship has been found!* Charley returns today to the desert to reap the fruition of his labors. He was without food or water, under a hot sun for over 24 hours, and came near perishing. We have not space to report in full the adventures of the party but are promised a full account in our next."

"A later item carried another account of Clusker's return with "shovels, picks, blocks, chains, rope and three or four hundred feet of boards. From this place they go to Warner's Ranch and from that point direct for the ship. At Cariso Creek station, on the San Diego road, they intend making a depot for supplies which will preclude the possibility of their suffering for food or water. We expect to receive some interesting news, from the party, for publication, in a week or two, may not, however, until their return to San Bernardino when the mystery concerning the desert ship will be revealed. To those who are over anxious and curious to know how she came there and where she was going, we say, keep quiet and don't become excited, our associate of the *Guardian*, Mr. J. A. Talbot, is one of the party and on his return will give, no doubt, an interesting description of the trip and the ship."

"Later, I found a brief item in the Los Angeles *Star* which announced the return of the party from its searching trip but it seems Clusker and his outfit hurried right on home without pausing in Los Angeles long enough to give out a story. Note the fact that Talbot, who later in 1885 told the yarn of the boat having been built in Los Angeles in 1862, was one of the 'searching' party. I looked in vain through succeeding issues of the *Star* for some account of the success of the party but couldn't find a word. Some account of the Clusker party may have been printed in the *Guardian*, I haven't as yet been able to consult an old file of that paper. My belief is that Talbot, being a practical joker, went along on the party to find the ship he and his friends had "lost" eight years before, and Clusker and his friends kept quiet about it, not wishing to be kidded. The boat might have been cut up for firewood by wandering prospectors, or by Clusker and friends, or it may be under the waters of the Salton Sea or some of the sand dunes near it.

"Such is my version of the lost galleon. I know there will be skeptics and die-hards who will insist the Manila galleon yarn is the best, and thar's millions of gold moidores in the rotting ghostly hulk, but personally, after going over reams of contemporary newsprint of the 1850-1870 period, I'd say Talbot was right—and I for one don't intend pasearing out into that inferno looking for the ship in the desert."

—ARTHUR WOODWARD

HERE is the promised poem of The Tropical Tramp—"The Down-and-Out," by Clarence Leonard Hay. Cut it out and save it, because as sure as fate some readers will write in a couple of months saying that *Adventure* once printed the poem of The Tropical Tramp, and why not print it again? Here is a perennial that really deserves to come up each year.

THE DOWN-AND-OUT

By Clarence Leonard Hay

So, Son, you've come to the tropics, heard all that you had to do
Was to sit in the shade in a coconut glade, while the dollars rolled in to you?
They gave you that at the Bureau, you got the statistics straight?
Well, hear what it did to another kid before you decide your fate.
You don't go down with a short, hard fall; you just sort of shuffle along,
And lighten your load of the moral code till you can't tell the right from the wrong.
I started off to be honest, with everything on the square,
But a man can't fool with the golden rule in a crowd that don't play fair.
It's a choice of riding a dirty race or of being an also ran.
My only hope was to sneak and dope the horse of the other man.
I pulled a deal at Guayaquil, in an Inca silver mine,
And before they found 'twas salted ground I was safe in the Argentine;
I made short weight on the River Plate when running a freighter there,
And cracked a crib on a rich estate without ever turning a hair;
But the thing that'll double-bar my soul when it flaps at heaven's doors

Was peddling booze to the Santa Cruz, and Winchester forty-fours.
Made unafraid by my kindly aid, the drunk-crazed brutes came down
And left in a quivering, blazing mass a flourishing border town.
I was then in charge of a smuggler's barge on the coast of Yucatan,
But she sank to hell off Cozumel one night in a hurricane.
I got to shore on a broken oar in the filthy, shrieking dark,
With the other two of the good ship's crew converted into shark.
From a limestone cliff I flagged a skiff with a salt-soaked pair of jeans,
And worked my way (for I couldn't pay) on a fruiter to New Orleans.

It's a kind of a habit, the tropics, that gets you, worse than rum;
You get away, and you swear you'll stay, but it calls, and back you come.
Six short months went by before I was back there on the job,
Running a war in Salvador with a black-faced, bare-foot mob.
It was General Santiago Hicks at the head of a grand revolt,
And my only friend from start to end was a punishing Army colt.
I might have been Presidente now, a prosperous man of means,
But a gunboat came and blocked my game with a hundred and ten marines.
So I woke from my dream dead broke, then drifted from bad to worse,
And sank as low as a man can go who walks with an empty purse.
But stars, they say, appear by day when you're down in a deep, black pit.
My Lucky Star found me that way when I was about to quit,
In a fiery-hot, flea-ridden cot, I was down with the Yellow Jack,
Alone in the Bush and all but dead; She found me and nursed me back,
She came like the Miracle Man of old and opened my bad, blind eyes,
And upon me shone a clear new dawn as I turned my head to the skies.
There was pride and grace in her brown young face, for hers was the blood of kings;
In her eyes flashed the glory of empires gone and the secret of world-old things.
We were spliced in a Yankee meetinghouse on the land of your Uncle Sam,
And I drew my pay from the U. S. A., for I worked at the Gatun Dam.
Mind you, I take no credit for coming back to my own,
Though I walked again with honest men, I couldn't have done it alone.
Then the devil sent his right-hand man—I might have suspected he would—
And he took her life with a long thin knife because she was straight and good.

Within me died hope, honor, pride and all but a primitive will
To hound him down on his blood-red trail, and find—and kill—and kill!
Through logwood swamps and chicle camps I hunted him many a moon,
Then found my man in a log pit pan at the edge of a blue lagoon.
The chase was o'er at the farther shore; it ended a two years' quest.
And I left him there with an empty stare and a "John Crow" on his chest.

You see those punctures on my arm; you'd like to know what they mean?
Those marks were left by the fingers deft of my trained nurse, Miss Morphine.
Perhaps you think that's worse than drink—it's possible, too, you're right;
At least it drives away the Things that come and stare in the night.
There's a homestead down in an old Maine town with lilacs round the gate,
And the Northers whisper: "It might have been," but the truth has come too late.
They say they give me a month to live—a month or a year's the same;
I haven't the heart to play my part at the end of a losing game.
For whenever you play, whatever the way, for stakes that are big or small,
The claws of the tropics will gather your pile, and the dealer gets it all!

(Reprinted by courtesy of *Collier's*)

There is always a percentage of readers who don't read serials. It is a pity. Many of the best stories that ever appear are in these longer length.

If you did not begin "Secret Agent B-7" in the last issue, look at it now. The synopsis is short and easily grasped—you will find yourself under no handicap if you begin the story there. And this serial by a man of lifelong army experience and present very high rank is one you will remember—a suspenseful plot, a real drama of one of the most dangerous and least known phases of war by a man who knows what he is talking about. If you don't ordinarily read serials, nevertheless, try this one.

ASK ADVENTURE

For Information You Can't Get Elsewhere

A READER whose yawl sank under him in the Caribbean is now after a ketch to take him pearling in the South Seas.

Request:—Some two years ago you were good enough to supply me with information as to the islands from the Marquesans westward. At that time I was planning a trip around the world in a little 36 foot yawl. Said yawl now rests in Davy Jones' locker after doing her duty as far as the Caribbean, where she got tired arguing the right of way with hurricanes, and laid her little self down to sleep on the bottom of the sea.

At the present time the plans call for a ketch of about the same size, the recruiting of two or three divers, and possibly, if it could be arranged, a pearling trip taking in such of the grounds as can be reached from either Suva or Tahiti.

Is it possible for a boat of British or American registration to engage in pearling around Suva or Tahiti? Or are the grounds restricted to boats of French registry? Would there be sufficient receipts from the sale of pearls and shell (harvested with average good luck) to pay for the equipment and fitting out of a small boat and take care of the divers' pay? My own expenses would be taken care of. I would also be interested in advice as to the season, and the control exercised over the beds.

—H. A. DOUGHTY, Toronto, Canada.

Reply by Mr. William McCreadie:—I am delighted to hear from you again, but regret the sad decease of your yawl. Like yourself I am very attached to any kind of a boat and can sympathize with you in your loss.

Pearl shelling might be called a lost industry. In all the islands where shell used to be plentiful the governments have closed down tightly and between closed seasons and restrictions and last, but not least, a lack of shells the business is rather "bum."

The Governor of Tahiti in a letter to me says:

"The trade in pearl shell fishing at present offers very little of advantage. All the same, everyone who occupies himself in this business is bound to pay a license to deal in pearls of 1000 francs."

He adds a very gloomy outlook for any outsider to make a living just now in the group. I doubt very much if you would pay expenses but of course like horse-racing and lotteries, anything may happen—if you're lucky—but it's not a business I'd care to advance a loan on.

THE damn packsack *versus* the ideal packsack for a prospecting trip.

Request:—A pal and I are going to take a shot at prospecting in California. I've got U. S. Geological Survey maps for the territory and we're all ready to shove off.

But there are difficulties: the damn packsacks. I tried "designing" one after the Poirier (Duluth) pattern described in Kephart's "Camping and Woodcraft" out of an old duffle bag. Sweet! man yes! Everything went fine; sewing, cutting, riveting, etc. We gabbed about it, admired it and my pal got ready to cut up his duffle bag.

Then I put the thing on, loaded with junk, to see how it rode. Boy! she hung back like a stubborn mule making me lean forward till I near kissed the ground. And then a rivet let go! Imagine what a sweet time we'd have up in the hills with a job like that!

Now look. We've attained the ranks of drum majors in the army of the unemployed from pounding pavements so we've got to go easy on our capital. We've got to buy prospecting tools, flour, blankets, etc.

Your friend Kephart's in "Camping and Woodcraft"—that book goes with me—figures the Duluth sack was about as good as any.

Where do we buy them and what's the price? 12 oz. duck, leather shoulder straps, canvas head strap, copper riveted, 24 x 26 inches, and one-fourth pound? What about the Whelen pack he mentions? Do you think it would be better for us than the Duluth? What's its price and where?

Can you recommend any other packsack easy on the pocketbook that will stand up under rough usage.

What about this parched corn (or wheat) business? How much of parched corn do you get out of a bushel of the grain, and could a man use it for half his ration? And how much would a 150-pound man use at that rate?

How do you make dessicated eggs? I say make, because we have mighty little money to buy them.

In a choice between plain sugar or raisins on an extended trip, which would you take along? I know you should take half or both but just the same, I'm curious.

—E. T. SARKANS, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Reply by Mr. Paul M. Fink:—Your quest for the ideal packsack is an old story to me, for I've tried many types, hunting one that would stand up under the hardest of usage, was capacious, and yet easy to pack.

The easiest riding I have ever tried is the Norwegian pack, but it is hardly large enough to carry gear for a long trip. And how it would hang with a very heavy load I can't say, for I've never tried it with over 40 pounds.

In the West today they are using a great many pack boards. The nearest thing I have struck to this in the East is the U. S. Pak-Carrier. Pack your outfit in a big duffle bag and strap to this carrier, and it will ride easy. Built rigid, it has the great advantage of not permitting sharp corners of cans and tools to dig into your back. Rig up a tump line to it to share the burden when you have a very heavy load, and you should get along nicely.

After quite a bit of experimenting I developed a pack harness that I have used with satisfactory results, carrying loads up to 75 pounds without any great inconvenience. I'm enclosing a sketch, in case you wish to build one like it yourself. If so, use good harness leather and sew all seams, not rivet them. The packsack I use with this harness is one of the board-thick canvas sea-bags they use in the navy, but any strong duffle bag will do the trick. Don't try to save a few ounces in using a lighter weight strap or bag, for you will sacrifice much strength thereby, and maybe come to grief far from any repair facilities.

You ask about parched corn, or rockihoming, and how much one could get from a bushel of the grain. On a rough guess, I'd say enough to last him several natural lifetimes, unless he were in imminent danger of starvation most of the time. Even then after trying to live on it for a couple of weeks, you'd say, "Oh, Death, where is thy sting?" It may be all right for an emergency ration but that's all I can say for it. I used to carry it, and sometimes took as much as a spoonful or two at a time, but after packing it for several trips and never opening the bag, I discontinued the practise. Maybe Dan'l Boone and the other pioneers lived on it steadily, but they were a hardy race of men with hair on their chests, and there is no wonder that after a diet of that kind they had no fear of savage Indians nor wild beasts.

Dessicated eggs are eggs from which most of the moisture has been evaporated, reducing them to a powder. It would not be practicable to try doing this yourself. Get some "Baker's eggs," the same thing practically, but come considerably cheaper than what you would get from a delicatessen or outfitter.

If I were planning a grub list for your trip I'd have three pounds of sugar to one of raisins. The latter are a wonderful addition to the diet, for lunches, puddings, use in oatmeal, but simple sugar has many more culinary uses than raisins. And don't take a small vial of sacchrine tablets instead of sugar. They lack any food value whatever, whereas sugar is packed full of energy.

I hope you have an enjoyable trips and find gold at the grass-roots.

TEACH the slow-circling hawk to come to your call, and clear your field of crows.

Request:—I have caught a young Cooper hawk which is about five days old. What's the proper thing to feed him. He has a tremendous appetite.

Can this bird be trained to hunt crows and if so, how?

—NORMAN B. SLOTE, Goldens Bridge, N. Y.

Reply by Mr. Davis Quinn:—The best food for your young Cooper hawk is good raw beefsteak and fresh-killed birds. You should be able to teach him to hunt crows. Crows are much slower than a Cooper, of course, but then they have a habit of flocking and mobbing a hawk that molests them and as your Cooper is not a large bird it may be that the crows will be able to unite in scaring him off. However, you might experiment with the following formula:

Rear the bird in an outhouse, in a box or basket of straw set off the ground on a low pole, with a board or perch on top for exercise and for feeding. Teach the hawk to associate the sound of your voice with the act of feeding. As bird grows he will leave nest to fly and play on wing but should always return for feeding. As soon as he is full grown give him a chance to fly among crows and see what happens. If he gets a crow now it may be a good sign, as a taste of meat of his own kill will build up his confidence and enthusiasm. Of course he should always return to his box after a short period of freedom, for food. When you liberate him if you could liberate a live but sluggish crow at the same time it would help to steer him onto

crows. This is a crucial period in the training and if he fails to return after liberation he must be snared with a boxtrap or bownet and forthwith broken to the hood in a manner presently to be described.

Now you will want to teach him to know the lure (leather, or feathers, or a bird's wing, with meat attached; or a dead bird—either of which is attached to a string), and to come to it from greater and greater distances. Next, teach the bird to "wait on." Let it loose in a field and when it reaches a considerable height and is watching, let loose a crow (a pigeon will do). After two or three captive birds have been taken easily thus the hawk learns to mount eagerly for such game and to wait on (hover around patiently) till it is produced. Better start with prey heavy enough to pull your hawk down, lest it develop a tendency to carry off the prey—a bad habit to break.

Now teach your bird to learn the shout that is used to call it in the field, and to jump to your fist for food, the shout being used each time it is fed.

To acquaint the hawk with the lure: kneel down, gently unhood him, with the lure two or three feet away. While he is eating at the lure induce the bird back to your fist with a more tempting morsel of meat. All this while he will have been on the leash, but now when he suffers you to walk around him while feeding without evidencing disturbance, secure a light stout cord to the leash and let another person unhood the hawk, which should come 5 or 10 yards to where you stand shouting and casting out the lure. When the bird comes 30 yards thus without hesitation, increase the distance gradually till —the bird given its liberty—he will come 1000 yards to the lure.

Now teach him to stoop at the lure. Snatch the lure away as your hawk swerves by; he will return for a second trial immediately; practice this with him till he can take the lure finally from any angle of approach on the wing.

Now he is more fit for live quarry. Try him after tame or domestic birds at first, taking care to provide excellent wind and weather conditions during these first trials, and to give him every possible advantage.

All through the training period and after, the most essential thing is to keep your bird in topnotch condition. Training hawks, the same as other animals, is mainly through the appetite, but patience, gentleness and care count for much. And don't ever starve your bird beyond the normal hunger he might endure between feedings in nature. Feed the best meat you can obtain, alternated with fresh-killed pigeons, feathers and all, of course. Allow your hawk plenty of exercise; he is a vigorous creature and demands it to keep fit.

I don't know how successful you will be with your Cooper hawk. You'd do considerably better, no doubt, with a Goshawk or more particularly with a Duck hawk. The Duck hawk is a real falcon and an infinitely swifter bird than the Cooper.

THE boring of the barrels of the earliest flint-lock rifles took precision and patience.

Request:—I would appreciate a bit of information concerning the early American flint-lock rifle.

If I am correctly informed a not inconsiderable number of these guns were home manufactured. The barrel was obtained in the rough bar at one of the iron forges of that period and the work of shaping, boring and rifling was performed by the would-be gun owner.

Now what I would like to know is this: what kind of a fixture or set-up was devised for boring the barrel? How was the tool formed, and used, for cutting the grooves in the bore?

It is said that some of these amateur gunsmiths turned out very creditable jobs. While my knowledge of the gunsmiths' trade is limited I am familiar enough with the principal of mechanics to know that boring and rifling a gun barrel accurately is a task which requires no mean skill even with the fine tools available today. Hence my curiosity as to just how this work was accomplished with the meager equipment of a pioneer home work shop.

—J. H. JENSEN, Beloit, Wis.

Reply by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—I'll give a short description of the means used in building the flint-lock rifle, taken from the writings on this arm by Captain Dillin and Mr. Swayer.

The barrel was lap-welded, a long bar of soft iron being heated redhot and bent and welded about a mandril, about a quarter to a half inch at a time. This was the rough barrel.

Next, the bore was reamed, and the outside filed to octagon shape, after which the tube was placed in a cradle for the rifling tool, a plug on the end of a long rod being slotted for a cutter, which was called a "saw" and looked like a section of file, with coarse sharp teeth. This was pulled through the bore, a guide with ribs or grooves on it being used to cause the rod to turn as it was drawn through and give the twist to the grooves out in the barrel, one at a time. The saw was shimmed up with paper or thin silvers as the groove deepened, I may add.

After the rifling was done, the tube was tapped at the rear end and the breech plug was filed up from the forging and inserted, the pan welded on, the touch hole or flash hole bored, the sight slots made, and the barrel blued or browned. A mould was made

to cast the bullets in, small enough so that a patch of greased linen or buckskin could be used around the ball.

Then the lock was either made by hand, or purchased from some large supply house, and the stock was made up to suit the user, either from cherry, maple, or walnut, the first two seemingly the favorites of the old time riflesmith. When assembled, and silver or brass ornaments inserted in the wood of the stock, the rifle was a fine looking and very accurate arm.

Riflemaking was an art, and there were many professional riflesmiths in the old days. But few men indeed had the skill to make their own gun at home, but generally had them made to order.

For the best information on this subject, I'd advise you to purchase "The Kentucky Rifle," by Captain Dillin from the National Rifle Association, Barr Bldg., Washington, D. C.

DRINK, puppy, drink. Be he canine or lupine he'll lap the water.

Request:—Indirectly, but supposedly from a raiser of police dogs, I understand that police pups which drink water with their muzzles in the water (do not lap it) are considered to have too much wolf blood and are done away with. But in a fiction story, the author writes about a wolf lapping water. Do any dogs drink water with their muzzles in the water, and if so, does it mean anything?

—JOHN H. FILLER, Philadelphia, Pa.

Reply by Mr. John Thompson, Ozark Ripley:—The fiction author of whom you mention no doubt has seen wolves lap water as I have done on many occasions. Some dogs at times insert their muzzles way down in the water to enjoy the cooling influence or else for play. I have several pointers and setters and cockers who occasionally do this. Don't worry about the wolf blood being in police dogs. You will have to go way back a long distance before you find it. This mythical part of police dogs has certainly been exploited to the limit.

PAY dust and rocks in the Connecticut hills—Several inquiries have come to us about mining ventures in New England. Mr. Voight, *Ask Adventure* expert, writes:—

New England has seen mining booms from Colonial days until quite recently. The quarries at Barre, Vt., and Rutland yield the famous New England marble and granite.

Connecticut is most prolific. There was an old copper mine in the Flanders district in Southington; at Newgate (where the old state prison is), in the town of Granby mines were worked until the prison was moved to Wethersfield. During the Revolution the mines were worked by British prisoners of war. In 1830 a mine was started in Whigville, lapsed after a time, to be revived during the World War.

For 150 years iron ore has come from Salisbury, where the chain to blockade the Hudson during the Revolution was wrought.

Within the last three years a gold mine has been worked in the Mt. Carmel section of Hamden. Tourmalines are found in Maine, and amethyst and garnet appear in several districts.

But most of the gold comes in with the codfish, the tourist, and the cotton mills.

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Send each question *direct* to the expert in charge of the section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **Do Not** send questions to this magazine. Be definite; explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question. The magazine does not assume any responsibility. **No Reply** will be made to requests for partners, for financial banking or for employment.

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U. S. Marine Corps.—CAPT. F. W. HOPKINS, R. F. D. 1, Box 614, La Canada, Calif.

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Ornithology *Birds; Habits, distribution.*—DAVIS QUINN, 3548 Tryon Ave., Bronx, N. Y. C.

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Coins and Medals.—HOWLAND WOOD, American Numismatic Society. Broadway, at 156th St., N. Y. C.

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THE TRAIL AHEAD

October first Issue

Lagoon Loot

a novelette by Weston Martyr

SIX schooners of all nations and nothing in common except that their skippers were all hardboiled, lay in the pearl lagoon. The law was dead—had, in fact, drunk too much gin and accidentally drowned himself. The only good pearl bed was just large enough for one schooner to work. So at it they go—with all and any weapons—anything that has a trigger, a cutting edge, or can be thrown. As if this were all not bad enough, the gods of war and greed dump a real fortune into their midst, sink it in full sight in that riotous lagoon.

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Just Another Jones finds himself swept into a bushwhacking battle in which he has to pick off eleven, twelve, maybe thirteen men before he can find anybody to tell him what the shooting is about. And when he finds out— You will warm to this character in this novelette of humor and gunfire——

A STORY of the Legion by Kingsley Moses and Curtis Thomas that is an unusual yarn—so unusual you will either like it very much or wonder why the editor bought it. It concerns a Legionaire and his pig, and a pretty woman who is more dangerous than the Legionaire realizes, and an officer he considers far, far lower than the pig. It is a story with glamour, humor, brutality, and it is alive.

THERE is a boxing story, "Knockout in the Sticks" by Eddy Orcutt. Now a word as to boxing stories—we of the *Adventure* staff don't usually like them. We have a feeling they come of a pattern, they come by the yard. But this little drama of the ham and eggers will hold you, and then make you stop and think. It strikes us as the best boxing story we have ever read, barring only one and that was a good while back.

AND the next part of Ared White's good serial, with a new hazard for the American spy—and one or two short stories by well-known writers are now being selected to complete the issue.

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Page 127
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